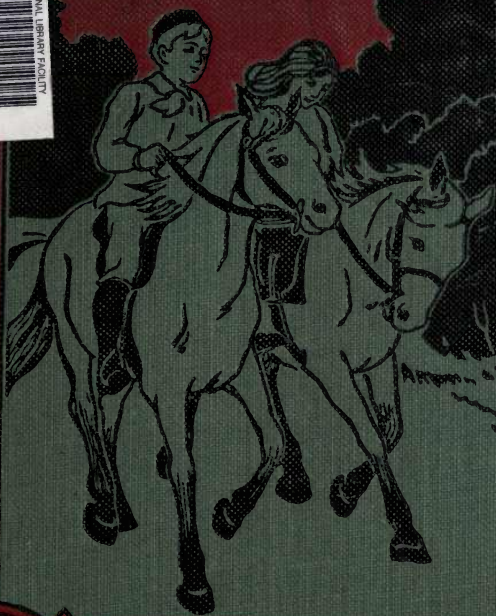


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HOLIDAYS AT SUNNYCROFT



A Merry Christmas
to Eugene Somerby
From Miss Wellman



Holidays at Sunnycroft and A Year at Coverley

BY

ANNIE S. SWAN

Author of "The Guinea Stamp" "St. Vedas" "Shells"
"The Gates of Eden" "Into the Haven" &c.

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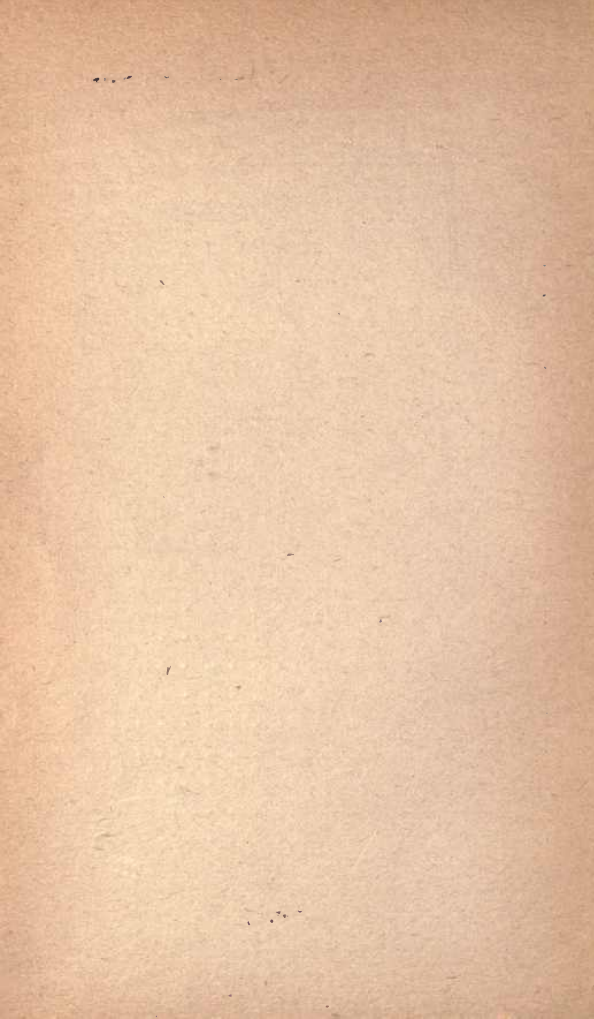
CONTENTS

HOLIDAYS AT SUNNYCROFT:—

CHAP.		Page
I.	GRANDPAPA'S LETTER	5
II.	THE INCORRIGIBLE	9
III.	SUNNYCROFT	15
IV.	THE FIRST MORNING	21
V.	FISHING IN THE BROOK	23
VI.	THE RAT HUNT	33
VII.	A BAYARD	40
VIII.	THE HARVEST FESTIVAL	49
IX.	WHEAT CAME OF IT	56

A YEAR AT COVERLEY:—

I.	NEWS	62
II.	THE NEW ARRIVALS	67
III.	THE NEXT MORNING	73
IV.	LOUIS IN TROUBLE	77
V.	FOR SUNBEAM'S SAKE	88
VI.	FANNY'S LESSON	90
VII.	A MIDNIGHT ADVENTURE	97
VIII.	IN HAWTHORN DELL	104
IX.	SUNBEAM'S STICK	110



HOLIDAYS AT SUNNYCROFT

CHAPTER I

GRANDPAPA'S LETTER

THIS is a letter from Grandpapa," said Mrs. Maynard to her husband one morning at breakfast.

"Yes, dear; and what is Grandpapa saying—anything new?" asked Mr. Maynard rather abstractedly, for he was absorbed in his own letters.

"Both he and Aunt Ellen are well. There is something else I shall speak to you about by and by," replied Mrs. Maynard; and, laying down her letter, she prepared a piece of bread and butter for little Nellie, and filled up Harry's cup with milk.

At mention of Grandpapa's name the children all pricked up their ears, and immediately four pairs of eyes were fixed with extreme wistfulness on the open letter by Mamma's plate. How they should like to know what that mysterious "something else" was, and whether it concerned them!

"Has Aunt Ellen any little chickens this year, Mamma?" asked Anna, in a grave quiet manner; for she was fourteen now, and felt almost grown-up.

"Grandpapa does not say, dear. Frank, don't cut your bread on the table-cloth, my boy; keep it on your plate. It is given you for the purpose of cutting your bread on," said Mrs. Maynard, looking with mild reproof at her eldest son—a lad of twelve, who was cutting his bread into neat squares, to the great risk of his mother's damask cloth.

"Why do they make plates so little, Mother? There isn't room for a fellow to cut his bread—there, now, I'm sure there isn't!" said Frank, in his straightforward, undaunted way.

"Hold your tongue, boy, and do what your mother bids you," said his father sharply, and with a frown turned his eyes on Frank's face.

"I'm doing it," said Frank daringly; then his father bade him leave the room, which he did in a very ungracious, sullen sort of way, taking care to kick the legs of the table as he rose, and to shut the door with a distinct bang.

"Anna, dear, take Nellie upstairs and put on a clean pinafore," said Mrs. Maynard. "Don't trouble Mary just now; you know nicely where to find Nellie's clothes. And, Harry, run out and play with Frank. I want to speak to your father."

"I hate to play with Frank, Mother. He knocks me about, and calls me silly, when I won't go up the beech-tree and play monkeys with him," said Harry, in a peevish, fretful way.

"Yes, my poor boy, Frank is much too rough for you," said Mr. Maynard soothingly; "you had better keep indoors with your sisters. Frank is only fit for these great rough lads in the street."

A look of pain crossed Mrs. Maynard's sweet face as she listened to her husband's words, so different from those which he had spoken to Frank. Harry had been a little delicate in his infancy, and had consequently been made a good deal of, particularly by his father; but he was by nature selfish and fretful, and liked to have all the attention and petting in the house. He did not offer to leave the room until his mother rose and, opening the door, pointed the way out. When they were left alone Mrs. Maynard turned to her husband and said gently:

"I wish you would not make such a difference between the boys, dear. I assure you Frank feels it very much."

"Frank feels it!" re-echoed Mr. Maynard incredulously. "My dear, you give him credit for feelings he does not possess, and never will. There is about as much feeling in Frank as in my coffee-cup. I tell you what it is, Anna, you will spoil that boy. He is wilful and disobedient, and needs a firm hand to control him."

"You are a little mistaken about him, Robert," Mrs. Maynard ventured to say. "He is certainly careless and thoughtless, but never disobedient nor wilful with me. He is indeed much less troublesome in that way than Harry. But Frank must be led gently; he will not drive."

"The old story, Anna. Frank was always your idol. Some day, when he commits some serious fault, you will regret your foolish indulgence," said Mr. Maynard.

"He is so truthful, too, Robert, and never hesitates

a moment about confessing a fault, whatever his punishment may be," said the mother, with a tear in her eye.

"Mere bravado that. His poor little brother is too sensitive. He so fears our displeasure, he would rather suffer in silence than confess," said Mr. Maynard, resolutely taking the part of his favourite son.

Mrs. Maynard held her peace. The respective merits of the boys had long been a vexed question, and had more than once occasioned a little bitterness between them. In his treatment of Frank Mr. Maynard was frequently not only harsh, but obviously unjust—even the slightest misdeed was rigorously punished—and the boy was often condemned unheard. Mrs. Maynard was quite correct in saying that Frank was keenly conscious of his father's preference for Harry, and as a natural consequence he shrank from and feared his father, while he clung to his mother with all the love of his passionate boyish heart. Mrs. Maynard was too good and wise a woman, and too conscientious and loving a mother, to show any preference whatsoever in her demeanour towards any of her children; but in her inmost heart she loved Frank the best.

"What is there in Grandpapa's letter you wished me to see?" said Mr. Maynard, glancing at his watch. "It is time I was off."

"There it is," said Mrs. Maynard, and handed him the letter, which he hastily perused.

"Um! he wants the children for the holidays. Well, what do you think? It will be a fine change for them."

"Delightful, if you or I could be with them," replied Mrs. Maynard doubtfully. "I am a little afraid of the trouble they will cause, and there are so many kinds of mischief Frank could get into at Sunnycroft."

"Send the others, and keep him at home till you can go down yourself with him," suggested Mr. Maynard.

"Oh, Robert, dear, I could not do that! Frank has done nothing deserving of such a severe punishment, and he is so fond of Sunnycroft and his grandfather!"

"He will be a pretty handful for Grandpapa and Ellen with her prim ways and her niceness about the house," said Mr. Maynard with a grim smile. "Well, you must decide for yourself, my dear. I am off."

So saying Mr. Maynard stooped and gave his wife a hasty kiss, bade her not look so worried and anxious about these troublesome children, and then went off to business.

CHAPTER II

THE INCORRIGIBLE

THE Maynards lived in Market Lufford, a busy midland town where Mr. Maynard carried on business as a manufacturer. Their house was one of a row of commodious and substantial dwellings built on a gentle eminence facing the town, and was called Redmond Terrace after the man who had built and

owned the property, and who occupied Number One. The Maynards' house was the fifth in the terrace. A newly-married couple stayed on one side of them, and on the other an old maiden lady who kept four cats and a fat poodle, and who lived in a state of perpetual warfare with the children in Number Five. Owing to his mischievous propensities, and utter disrespect for the comfort of the poodle and the cats, Frank was Miss Bowden's special aversion, and she daily expressed her firm conviction to her maid that that boy was born to be hanged. Now Frank, though fond of a frolic, would not willingly hurt a living thing; and though he was often blamed for throwing stones at her pets and for otherwise tormenting them, it was really Harry who was the guilty party. The houses in Redmond Terrace had large gardens at the back, and the Maynards possessed a fine beech-tree in theirs which was the envy of the neighbours, and Frank's greatest source of outdoor amusement. Although the trunk was so smooth and slippery he could run up as nimbly as Miss Bowden's cats, and, securely hid among the leafy boughs, he commanded a splendid view of the neighbours' gardens and windows as well as of the country for miles around. He called it his watch-tower, his stronghold, and a great many other names, and was proud in his undisputed possession of it, for Harry had never yet summoned up courage to climb to Frank's roost.

After her husband left the house that morning Mrs. Maynard gave her orders to the cook, and then went in search of the children. She had quickly decided to accept her father's invitation for various reasons.

One was, that, as business had been very dull of late, they could not afford to go to the coast as usual, and she thought the children would be much better for the change into Cumberland for a few weeks. Another was, that she did not know what to do with the boys during the school recess; they were either getting into mischief outside, or making a din in the house which her sensitive nerves could not bear. She would fain have gone with them. Her heart was yearning unspeakably for her own kindred, and for a peep at the sweet manor-house among the Cumberland hills. But Mr. Maynard was a man who required that his comfort should be studied at all times, and she never for a moment dreamed of leaving him in the care of servants. She therefore made up her mind to send the family in charge of Mary the housemaid, who was a sensible kind girl and very fond of the children; and she could only hope that respect for Grandpapa, and also for Aunt Ellen, who was very prim and old-maidish in her ways, would induce them to behave themselves at least fairly well.

When Mrs. Maynard stepped out of the kitchen into the courtyard and looked round, she could see nothing of the boys. Knowing Frank's tree-climbing propensity, however, she stepped across the green, and, looking up, saw a chubby face grinning at her from the net-work of bright-green leaves.

"Come down, Frank dear, I want to speak to you," she said. "Is Harry beside you?"

"Harry! not likely!" answered Frank, in tones of supreme scorn. "He wouldn't climb this tree for

a hundred pounds. He is a baby about himself."

"Perhaps he is the wiser of the two, dear, as you may admit if you fall some day and break your leg."

"No fear; see this, Mother," said Frank; and with the agility of a monkey he swung himself from branch to branch, and finally slid down the trunk in a manner which caused Mrs. Maynard to quake for his safety.

"Boy, what are you made of? Have you any bones?" she asked laughingly.

"Yes, a few," replied Frank, shaking himself free of sundry ants and other insects which were clinging to him. "Well, Mother, what is it?"

"That was a letter from your grandfather this morning," said Mrs. Maynard.

"Yes, and what?" asked Frank breathlessly.

"It contained an invitation for you all to come to Sunnycroft for a month."

"Oh my!" Frank's face as he gave utterance to that exclamation was indeed a study.

"Your father has left it to me to decide, and I think I shall accept the invitation for you all."

"Hurrah!" Frank tossed his cap in the air and turned a somersault in the exuberance of his delight.

"If you have quite finished, Frank, I would like you to listen to me for a few minutes."

"All right, Mother, I'm done, I'm listening!" said Frank, settling his cap on his brown curls, and lifting his honest eyes to his mother's sweet face. They were very honest, those shining gray orbs. Looking into them you felt that it would be impossible for their possessor to tell a lie.

"As neither your father nor I can accompany you to Sunnycroft, I can only permit you to go on one condition."



"Any number of conditions if you like, Mother, if only you let us," answered Frank readily.

"My boy, I wish you were as ready to fulfil conditions as to agree to them," said Mrs. Maynard a little gravely. "You know neither your grandpapa

nor your Aunt Ellen are accustomed to wild boys like you, and I cannot send you there unless you not only promise but try to be good."

"But Grandpapa is so jolly, Mother!" Frank ventured. "He likes us to have fun. He isn't like the grandfathers in story-books, who think boys can sit still all day."

A very tender smile touched Mrs. Maynard's lips at this boyish tribute to her father, whom she loved with a most passionate devotion.

"Yes, my boy, Grandpapa likes to see you enjoy yourselves, and no one expects you to sit still all day. That is not what you go to the country for. I only want you to keep out of mischief, and to remember that Aunt Ellen is a great deal more particular about keeping her house tidy and clean than I have been since you children came."

"I'll try, Mother; and when our boots are muddy we can take them off on the lawn, or climb in by yon little scullery window where the swallows built that time I was there with you."

"If you begin climbing in by windows, dear, you will frighten your Aunt Ellen out of her wits."

"Mother," said Frank, after a moment's thought, "I wish Aunt Ellen had some boys of her own, then she'd know how hard it is to behave."

What could Mrs. Maynard do but laugh and turn away? Of what use was it trying to impress on the incorrigible the duty of being good and proper? She could just hope that he would do nothing very bad while at Sunnycroft. With the minor offences and small acts of thoughtlessness of which the boyish

nature could scarcely help being guilty Aunt Ellen must just be patient, and send the boys home if they got beyond her endurance. She wrote to her sister to that effect, and then hastened forward the preparations for the children's departure.

CHAPTER III

SUNNYCROFT

IN the whole world it would have been difficult to find a sweeter spot to live in than Sunnycroft, the residence of Mr. Foster—Squire Foster as he was called in Brailsford. It was a lovely old manor-house built in the quaint Elizabethan style, and it seemed as if every one of the quaint turrets and mullioned windows could tell a tale of the romance of other days. It stood in an extensive and finely-wooded park, in which was a lake, one of the chief beauties of Sunnycroft. The trees in the park, mostly oak and chestnut, were very old, and had a solemn and patriarchal look, as if they had lived so long that they thought themselves very wise. The turf in the park was as soft as finest velvet, and studded all over with star-eyed daisies, looking for all the world as if they had fallen in a shower from the sky. There was a beautiful and shady avenue leading from the public road up to the house, and there was a wide sweep of pretty yellow gravel in front of the door, which showed in fine contrast against the bright

green of the grass and trees. At the back of the house were all the outhouses and stables; and it was from the back that the best view could be had of the far-stretching and fertile plains, hemmed in at length by the purple ridges of the Cumberland hills.

On the other side of the paddock, where the squire's horse and the two cows grazed, were the clustering roof-trees of the home-farm, which the squire superintended himself, and which was a great source of pleasure and occupation to him. Although Sunnycroft Manor was such an imposing-looking place, and though Mr. Foster was still, out of courtesy and love, called the Squire, it was really little more than a residence. There was one other farm besides the few acres the squire farmed himself: it was called Poplar Farm, because of the fine copse of poplar-trees surrounding the house. The tenant of Poplar Farm was Mr. Hurst, a clever agriculturist and a very honest man, only he had such a violent temper that very few respected him.

Squire Foster was not a rich man. In times gone by the Fosters of Sunnycroft had been among the largest land-owners in the county, and had kept up a great establishment, but that was long ago. By degrees the family had come down, through extravagance and heedlessness, and now the Fosters were very poor, and lived very, very quietly in the old manor-house among the hills.

Yet they were very proud in their poverty, and both the squire and his daughter Ellen had opposed Mrs. Maynard's marriage with the Lufford mill-spinner. However, they had at last given their

consent, but there never was any close intimacy between them afterwards. Ellen Foster did not like Mr. Maynard, and seldom went to Lufford; but she was sorry for her sister, and was as kind as possible to the children for their mother's sake.

On the afternoon of the day on which the children were expected at the manor, Mr. Foster and his daughter were sitting in the pleasant dining-room discussing the visit, which would be quite an event in their quiet lives. The squire was a very fine-looking old gentleman, straight, and tall, and handsome still, though his hair was as white as snow and he was in his seventy-second year. His face was a kind and pleasant one, but his eye was keen and penetrating, and could flash angrily when he was annoyed. His daughter resembled him closely, and was a handsome, distinguished-looking woman. She was scrupulously neat in her attire, and had a little of that prim and decorous look about her which you see often in women who have lived quiet or solitary lives. She was rather a woman to be respected and admired than loved, except by those who knew her very well, and to them she was very dear, because she was as true as steel.

"I hope it will be fine weather when the children are here," said Mr. Foster, looking somewhat anxiously at the sky, which had overcast a little.

"I hope so, I am sure, Papa. It will be very dreadful if they have to be much in the house," answered Ellen. "I have a lively recollection of several wet days at Lufford when I was there. I said to Anna I could not imagine how she could listen so

unconcernedly to the incessant din which went on in the nursery from morning till night."

"Poor Anna has her work and her trials with them, I dare say. But she tells me they are troublesome blessings or blessed troubles, I forget which," replied the squire. "Do you think it will be nearly time to go to the station?"

"Dear me, Papa, the train does not come in till ten minutes to six; it is only five now. How impatient you are!" exclaimed his daughter, in an amused voice.

"Well, well, I can't help it. Do you think I should take the wagonette or the phaeton?"

"Oh, the phaeton if you are going to drive yourself! Anna's children have a propensity for falling out of conveyances, and they would not get badly hurt though they came to grief in the phaeton."

"You take a very philosophical view of it, Ellen," laughed the squire, and went off to the stables.

Meanwhile the train, which contained among other passengers four very eager and excited children in care of a pleasant-faced girl, was speeding northwards towards Brailsford. After the first stages of the journey from Lufford were passed, little Nellie got very sleepy, and contentedly curled herself up under Mary's kind protecting arm; but Frank and Harry talked incessantly, and the former never sat five minutes in the same position.

Even Anna, a little excited over the visit, condescended to join in the boys' talk, and to enter into their plans for enjoyment.

Frank had a railway map in his pocket, and very carefully followed their route, marking out the name

of each station as they passed with a red pencil, and triumphantly announcing each time the diminishing number of stoppages which would occur between it



and their destination. As they came very near Brailsford he got so excited that he hung half out of the window, regardless of Mary's entreaties and Anna's reminders how he had promised Mamma to keep back from the carriage windows. When the train at length puffed into the pretty station he said, "Hurrah! here we are!" And Mary roused up

Nellie with a sigh of relief that the journey was accomplished without mishap.

"There's Grandpapa!" cried Frank.

"And oh! Harry, there's a new pony—the old one had a white foot and a star on its face. Yes, Grandpa, coming!" he shouted, seeing the old gentleman waving his hat. Several passengers smiled at that, and Anna, rather shocked, gently reproved him for being so boisterous. The porter came forward to take the luggage across the line, then the little party went over by the pretty little bridge for foot passengers, and in a minute they were all round Grandpapa, nearly smothering him with their noisy greetings.

"Hulloa, Frank, you rascal, how you have grown! Anna, you are quite a young lady. Give me a kiss, Nellie. Harry, the pony won't eat you, he is only in a hurry to be off. Well, get in all of you," said the old gentleman, in his hearty fashion. "Well, my girl," he added kindly to Mary, "you will not be sorry to find yourself and your troublesome charges at your journey's end."

Then they all got in, the pony's head was turned, and off he went as if he found the addition to his burden very light.

Grandpapa was very much amused with their incessant chatter during the pleasant drive through the leafy lanes to Sunnycroft; but it was observable that his eyes were oftenest on Frank's face, and that he seemed to find it a pleasant study.

In the wide low door of the manor-house stood Aunt Ellen, a stately figure in rich black silk, waiting to receive the children. They felt a little shy of her,

but her smile was so sweet, and she seemed so very glad to see them all, that that feeling wore away, and in a little while they sat down to a substantial tea in the dining-room, as cosy and happy and hungry a party of young folks as could be found in all England.

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST MORNING

NEXT morning broke with cloudless skies and brilliant sunshine, and it really seemed as if the summer, which had been so tardy in coming that year, was going to make up for it now by being very fine while it lasted.

Aunt Ellen was awakened rather earlier than usual by a sound which, for a moment, puzzled her, until she remembered the presence of the children in the house. It was Frank shouting, singing, and whistling by turns, and occasionally varying his performance by calling to Harry in no very gentle tones to get up and not lie abed all day when the sun was shining so jolly out-of-doors. Smiling to herself Aunt Ellen rose, and, throwing on her dressing-gown, went to get a peep at the room where her nephews were. She was rather alarmed at what she beheld there. The window-sash was thrown wide open, and Frank was hanging out, attired in his airy night-shirt and with one stocking drawn half on. He was doing his best to imitate the clear notes of a thrush in the shrubbery, to the no small amazement of that peaceable bird, who

came as near the window as he dared, to investigate the echo of his song. Harry was apparently asleep, though the clothes were all topsy-turvy, and a pillow, which had evidently been shied at him, was lying across his chest.

"Frank, my boy, you had better get dressed," Aunt Ellen suggested mildly.

"Oh, Aunt Ellen, I beg your pardon, I forgot I hadn't got my clothes on! It is so perfectly splendid out there!" said Frank, not at all disconcerted.

"Poke Harry, will you? If you don't he'll get downstairs about dinner-time, not sooner."

"No, I won't, that's a fib," said Harry, in a sleepy cross voice. "Why can't you let a fellow sleep till it's time to get up?"

"Don't bicker, boys. Get up, Harry, and both of you get dressed quickly," said Aunt Ellen. "Breakfast will be in half an hour, so make haste."

"Then Harry, with a comprehensive yawn, slowly crept out of bed and began to hunt for his stockings, which had disappeared in a very mysterious sort of fashion. Observing a peculiar grin on Frank's face he at once accused him of hiding them. Frank immediately put on an expression of injured innocence and went on with his washing, inwardly enjoying his brother's grumblings over the missing articles.

"Why do you open the window? I'm perished with cold!" said Harry peevishly. "You wouldn't have dared to do that at home if Papa knew."

So saying he advanced to shut the casement, and, giving a peep out as he did so, beheld his lost stockings dangling from a branch of the rose-tree which

clambered about the window. Not being so tall nor so long-armed as Frank, he could not reach them, but without saying anything he went to turn up the trunk for another pair. Just then Mary came in to see what they were about, roundly scolded Frank for his mischief, and then hurried on their toilets so that both were ready when the bell rang. Anna and Nellie were already downstairs, the latter looking as fresh and sweet as a daisy in her little white frock and blue ribbons, and Anna the very pink of propriety, much to Aunt Ellen's delight.

"Well, children, what are you to be about to-day?" asked Grandpapa cheerily, when they sat down to breakfast.

"Aunt Ellen is to take Nellie and me to see her feed the chickens," said Anna, "and then we will walk in the park and get some wild flowers."

"Grandpapa, is there a boat on the lake yet?" asked Frank, with his mouth full.

"There is a boat in the boat-house yet, my boy, but unless your aunt, or I, or Sam at least, is with you you must keep away from the lake. It is not a place for lads like you."

"Why, Grandpapa, I'm quite big now, I could row beautifully, myself," said Frank dolefully.

"You are not to go, my boy," said Grandpapa in his quiet but decided way; "and remember, I expect to be obeyed."

"Can we have out the pony then?" queried the irrepressible.

"Why, Frank, is there nothing at Sunnycroft to amuse you but forbidden things?" asked Grandpapa

good-humouredly. "When I was a boy it was sufficient for me to be out-of-doors in the country on a day like this. You must not be troublesome, nor meddle with any of the animals unless I give you leave. Just run about and look at everything; you must just provide amusement for yourselves."

"All right, Grandpapa!" said Frank cheerfully. "At least we can climb trees and wade in the brook without doing any harm."

"You can," said Harry, in his peevish fashion. "I'd catch cold in the brook, and you know I hate climbing trees."

"You can't do it, you mean," corrected Frank. "Well, you can go see the chickens with Anna and baby; it's a pity you hadn't a frock to put on."

"You be quiet!" said Harry angrily, and his dark face became very unpleasant to look upon.

"Now, boys, once for all, I will have no quarrelling here," said Grandpapa peremptorily. "If you cannot live peaceably and enjoy yourselves together as brothers should, why, then you must go home, that's all."

"Well, he's such a baby, Grandpapa. He's quite strong if he likes, only he won't do anything. What's he good for?" asked Frank, with charming frankness.

"My boy, how do you know whether your brother is quite strong or not? you cannot tell exactly," said Grandpapa mildly; "you must be kind to each other and play nicely together."

"I would if he'd come, Grandpapa; but he cries at the least thing," answered Frank.

"If you say these things about me I'll write and

tell Papa, and then you'll see what you'll get," said Harry, dashing away some angry tears. Aunt Ellen looked annoyed, and Grandpapa seemed vexed also.

"No more was said, and Frank, feeling the atmosphere of the dining-room not quite comfortable, was unfeignedly glad when breakfast was over.

"May I go out now, Aunt Ellen?" he asked humbly. "There's no room in the inside of houses. I always feel so shut up, just like in a jail, when I can't get out."

"Go, by all means, Frank," she answered, with a smile, understanding very well how the boy's pulses bounded more in unison with the throbbing outside world than with the "inside of houses".

So Frank went off whistling, and Harry, seeming to think better of it, got his cap also, and the two ran together out-of-doors.

Anna took Nellie away upstairs to get her sun-hat, and when the children were all gone Aunt Ellen turned to her father with an odd little smile on her face.

"These two boys are most amusing," she said. "There is a great contrast between them."

"There is. It is a pity Harry cannot get out of his childish, fretful ways; but Frank is very unmerciful towards him."

"Oh, it will do him good! Frank has a truly kind heart, Papa, and would not willingly hurt a fly. I am not sure but that I like him the best of all Anna's children."

"It is his mother's eyes and smile, my dear, that win our hearts," said the squire. "But we must not

be unjust to the others because Frank is a Foster like ourselves."

CHAPTER V

FISHING IN THE BROOK

THE boys found their way round by the shrubbery to the back of the house, and in the stone courtyard found Sam rubbing the dust off the phaeton. He was a simple, good-natured, country lad, the son of a poor widow in Brailsford, who had been very glad indeed to get her boy into so good a place as stable-boy to Squire Foster. He was still young enough to love a frolic dearly, and he looked with a very friendly eye on the squire's two small grandsons, who would be likely to make some stir about quiet Sunnycroft.

"What's your name?" asked Frank, stopping in front of him and looking enquiringly into his face.

"Sam, young sir, Sam Nuggins," answered the lad, with a grin.

"Nuggins! What a funny name!" said Frank. "What are you doing, eh?"

"Cleanin' up," replied Sam, applying his leather vigorously to the spokes of the wheel. "I dunno which is worse—the mud and slush in winter or the dust in summer."

"Can't you leave off and come and play with us, and show us birds' nests and things?" asked Frank innocently.

Sam's grin broadened as he answered:

"Not quite, 'cos I've my work to do—my playin' days is done."

Frank meditated a moment on this philosophical reply, and then said slowly:

"You're not very big—not much bigger than me. Where's the pony kept?"

"In the stable, but it's locked and Heaton has the key. He's gone to the garding," answered Sam.

Frank looked rather disappointed, and, growing tired presently of watching Sam at his work, he asked Harry if he was going over to the lake. Harry assented, as a quiet stroll through the park did not involve any violent exertion or difficult feat. So the twain marched away round by the paddock, stopped for a little to admire the two cows, Brindle and Beauty, and to enjoy the gambols of a very frisky calf not many weeks old.

"I say, Harry, isn't this a prime place!" exclaimed Frank, in the perfect exuberance of his delight over the beauties all about him.

"Yes, it's very nice," Harry answered in his cool fashion. "That isn't the road to the lake—see, it's away over that way."

"Is it? oh, all right! I wish I was a man nearly as old as Grandpa, but not quite, and that I lived at Sunnycroft," said Frank.

"I'd rather be Papa than Grandpa," said Harry. "There's more to be seen in the mill than here, I think."

"The mill!" The expression on Frank's face told in what estimation he held the place where his father

earned his bread. "I'll tell you what, Harry, if I'd to poke every day in yon dreadful, noisy, smoky place, I'd just die right away—choke or something. I'd rather be somebody's boy, like Sam is, and clean up carriages, than have a mill."

"Well, but when we grow big we'll be going to the mill with Papa. Boys always do what their fathers do," said Harry. "Look! there's the boat; it isn't in the boat-house at all."

"Oh my!" With that exclamation Frank bounded off to the little creek where the dainty *Mosquito*, Aunt Ellen's boat, was moored. The lake certainly looked very tempting that fair summer morning, with the sun shining on it till it glittered like a sea of glass. There was not a ripple on its broad breast save the little eddies where the lusty trouts leaped up to catch the insects humming in the drowsy air.

"Let's get in," said Harry a little excitedly, for the tiny punt was dancing very temptingly on the sunny waters, with the two slim oars lying handily across the seat.

"Oh no, we can't! Grandpa said we weren't to, don't you remember?" said Frank sadly.

"Grandpa wouldn't know," said Harry readily. "I heard him telling the girl to order his horse, as he was going away somewhere at ten o'clock; besides, nobody can see us here."

That was indeed true, for the lake was entirely hidden from view by a thick fringe of leafy lime-trees, and then the wooded park intervened between it and the house.

"I wouldn't go in for anything when Grandpa said

we hadn't to," said Frank. "Don't you remember that Mother said we were to be obedient?"

"I never heard her, and Papa didn't say it," maintained Harry. "Oh, Frank! see what little tiny oars! I'm sure we could row just beautifully with them."

Frank was sorely tempted, for he had a perfect passion for the water, but he resolutely turned away.

"I won't do it, Harry. Come on and let us go away up the brook and see where it rises. I'm sure there'll be plenty little fishes in it, 'cos there's so many here. Don't you see they come swimming down the brook when they want a great big lot of water to play in."

"You'll never do what I want," said Harry sullenly. "I can't walk miles and miles looking for the beginning of a stupid brook. You always want to do things I can't."

"We needn't go miles and miles; we can stop whenever you are tired," said Frank, with wonderful patience. "Come on. If we stop here much longer we'll be going into the boat, and then we'll feel bad all day, besides making Grandpa awfully angry. What if he sent us home?"

"I wouldn't care. It isn't very nice here," said Harry, and, turning very reluctantly away, followed Frank round to where the brook flowed into the lake.

Frank had guessed rightly—there were plenty of little fishes, and big ones too, in the brook, sporting playfully in the deep clear pools with the pebbly beds, or hiding cunningly under the overhanging banks and

among the stones which the flow of water had made so smooth and shiny. Frank cast off his shoes and stockings, rolled up his trousers, and stepped in, giving himself a little shake when the icy water closed over his feet.

"Isn't it cold?" enquired Harry doubtfully, longing yet afraid to venture after him.

"No; just a little at first, then it's prime. Oh, Harry! do be quick; there's a great big speckly one behind this stone, and unless you help me he'll get away."

"Do fishes bite people?"

"Oh! you stupid—no! Ah! there he is off; never mind, there's plenty more," cried Frank excitedly. "Oh! do come on."

Harry, catching a little of his brother's spirit, hastily threw off his shoes and stockings, and after a moment's hesitation stepped into the deep pool where Frank was busy watching the trouts. Not quite so brave as his brother, he uttered a slight scream when he felt the cold water on his legs, and, lifting out one foot to relieve it, he leaned all his weight on the other, and somehow lost his balance and fell over. As he did so he caught hold of Frank's jacket, and held on so tightly that he pulled him on top of him, and so they had a bath together.

Harry screamed out at the pitch of his voice that he was drowning, but Frank got up to his feet and dragged Harry after him up on the bank.

"What made you tumble and then pull me over like that?" asked Frank, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. "Just look at us!"

"It was all your fault; you would bring me to this horrid brook and drag me in after you," said Harry angrily. "We might have been drowned."



"In two feet of water! Not unless we lay down on our faces," said Frank. "Come on, let's get away home, or you'll catch cold. Oh my! what'll Aunt Ellen say?"

At the thought of Aunt Ellen's face of astonishment, and when he looked at Harry's dripping figure and woebegone face, he burst out laughing; but Harry preserved a very sullen expression, and walked on in front in as dignified a manner as his appearance would permit, and so the melancholy-looking pair wended their way back to the house. Aunt Ellen and her two nieces were sitting on the lawn under the pleasant shade of a spreading chesnut-tree, and the boys were quite close upon them before they saw them coming.

"Oh, Aunt Ellen!" cried Anna, in a shocked voice, "just look at Frank and Harry!"

A very stern expression came on Aunt Ellen's fine face at sight of the dripping figures, for she feared they had been touching forbidden things, and had come to grief at the lake. But Frank's first words, uttered in a voice shaking with laughter, set her fears at rest.

"It was in the brook, Auntie, where we went to get little fishes; we tumbled in," he said, not telling Harry's part in it, for unless he was obliged to do so he never blamed his brother.

"You are a beautiful pair," was Aunt Ellen's verdict. "I hope you won't catch cold over it. Get away in to Mary at once, and ask her for dry clothes."

CHAPTER VI

THE RAT HUNT

WHAT'LL we do to-day, eh?" said Frank rather dismally, for the rain was pouring down in a swift and steady torrent from the most threatening and ominous sort of sky.

"Couldn't you sit down to a book, Frank?" queried Grandpa, with a twinkle in his eye, for he knew very well he was suggesting a very unlikely thing.

"I could," said Frank. "But—"

"But what?"

"I don't s'pose anybody would look in the insides of books unless they had to, or perhaps when they grow old, eh, Grandpa?" asked Frank. "Books are just plagues!"

"Well, well, the time may come when you will enjoy them," said Grandpapa good-humouredly. "There's the outhouses you can go to. The hayloft is nearly empty; that will be a fine place for you to romp in, so off you go. Don't get into mischief, don't quarrel, and don't let me see your faces till dinner-time."

"All right, Grandpa!" answered Frank. "Can we get Sam Nuggins to play with us?"

"Sam has his work to do, and he is an idle young rascal as it is," said Grandpapa. "Can't the four of you manage to enjoy yourselves for a forenoon?"

"I dare say," said Frank rather disconsolately, and stuffing his hands in his pockets wandered out of the dining-room and found his way through the kitchen to the back premises.

The stone courtyard was wet and sloppy, the pigeons hopped about with dripping wings and draggled tails, and Lion, the big watch-dog, lay blinking lazily in the shelter of his kennel.

"This is a poky place," said Harry's voice at his elbow. "I wish I was back at Lufford."

"Not I," said Frank. "Come on; let's go up to the hayloft and see what we can do. Aren't the girls coming?"

"Yes, they're getting their hats," answered Harry. "On you go then; we're just getting wet standing here."

With one bound Frank crossed the wet courtyard into the stable, and clambered up the somewhat steep ladder to the hayloft. It was a fine roomy place, with a small quantity of hay stored in the darkest corner. Frank marched all round it and then threw himself on the hay, saying, a little impatiently:

"Now if the girls would only come we might have some fun."

"What at? what can we play at here?" asked Harry discontentedly.

But just then they heard Anna's voice below, and Frank ran to help his sisters up the ladder. Although he loved to tease Anna about her prim ways, he was always willing to help her; and he loved little Nellie with a deep and passionate love. She was a sweet, dear little child, of a very sunny

and happy disposition, but she was not very strong, and was extremely nervous and easily frightened.

"Come on, pussy cat—there you are!" said Frank, as he triumphantly got her up the last step. "Now isn't this a nice place, eh?"

"Dark, Frankie," answered Nellie, looking rather doubtfully into the dark corner and keeping a very tight hold of his hand.

"Oh, nonsense, pussy! It's quite light when you get used. Come and I'll roll you in the hay."

"Let's all sit down, and I'll tell you a lovely story Aunt Ellen told us last night," said Anna, eager for any quiet game.

"Has it some robbers and adventures and things in it?" asked Frank, as he swung Nellie in among the hay.

"Not likely! Do you think Aunt Ellen would tell anything so improper, Frank Maynard?" asked Anna a little loftily. "But it is a splendid story for all that."

"All right, fire away!" said Frank, in his off-hand fashion.

So they all squatted down among the soft hay, and Anna began her story.

"Once upon a time there was an old woman—"

"Who lived in a shoe," supplemented Frank irreverently. "'Sh! what's that?"

"Nothing, and if you interrupt me like that I won't tell it," said Anna, "and it's a lovely story."

"Well, go on then; don't stop so many times," said Harry impatiently.

"Well, this old woman had a dog and cat and a pet lamb, and—"

"I believe there's rats among this hay!" interrupted Harry. "There's things moving under us."

Anna gave a slight scream and sprang to her feet. "Let's get out of this place. Rats! Oh, you horrid thing, Harry Maynard! I don't believe there's any such thing."

"Listen then," said Harry; and Frank, with a very excited look, listened intently for the next sound. In a minute there was a rustling among the hay, then Frank sprang up in glee.

"Yes, there is; let's hunt them out. Oh! I wish we had Miss Bowden's poodle."

"I'm going down if you're going to hunt rats," said Anna. "Come, Nellie, we'll go into the house."

"No, don't. Climb up on these sacks of corn and sit and see the fun," said Frank; and Anna, somewhat reluctantly, obeyed. Then the boys began to poke vigorously among the hay with their sticks, and after a few minutes' intense excitement out sprang a big gray rat and scampered across the floor. Then began an eager chase, up and down, backwards and forwards. Frank chased the rat, while Harry kept guard on the hole behind the hay, which was its only means of exit. Nellie clung to Anna, not sure whether to cry or laugh, for she was very frightened; yet it was so funny to see the rat scampering up and down, pursued by Frank.

"I guess we'll let him into his hole now," said Frank. "Poor old chap, he'll be tired. Let him in, Harry. He's had exercise enough."

"Let him in!" exclaimed Harry. "Not likely! We must kill him. Rats are no good anyway but to

kill. Give him a hit, Frank, and I'll give him another when he comes up here."

"If you do, Harry Maynard, I'll tell Grandpapa!"



cried Anna indignantly. "He says we should be kind to all animals."

"I won't hit him, Anna," said Frank. "You wouldn't be so mean, Harry; let the poor fellow in."

The rat came rushing over to his hole, but Harry let the heavy end of his stick fall with its full weight on the poor creature's back. It uttered a shrill scream and rolled over writhing in agony.

"Harry Maynard, you are a bad, horrid boy!"

cried Anna. "I don't know how you can be so cruel, and I'll just go down this minute and tell Grandpa."

"Will you?" asked Harry, and catching up the rat by the tail he came swinging it towards his sisters.

Nellie screamed loudly in affright, and sliding from her perch on the corn-sacks, began to run towards the ladder. Anna followed her, for Harry was pursuing her with the still living rat.

"Stop that, Harry! you are a coward, trying to frighten girls," cried Frank angrily, and, running forward, tried to get the rat from Harry's clutches. In the midst of this struggle a shrill scream from Anna made them suddenly stop.

"Nellie! Nellie's tumbled down the ladder! I believe she's dead!" she cried. Then they all looked down the trap-door, and there, sure enough, was Nellie lying white and still on a heap of straw in the stable below. They looked at each other for a moment in silent consternation; then Frank scrambled down the ladder, took Nellie in his arms, and carried her into the house. Aunt Ellen, who happened to be in the kitchen giving some orders to the cook, looked round in surprise at the unusual sight, never for a moment dreaming that anything was wrong.

"Are you playing nurse, Frank?" she asked pleasantly; and then she saw Nellie's white face.

"There's something wrong with Nellie, Aunt Ellen. She tumbled down the trap-door," said Frank, in a strange, low, fearful voice.

Aunt Ellen's face grew very white also, and without speaking a word she took Nellie in her arms.

"Send Sam away to Brailsford for the doctor, and

tell him to ride round by Dunstanley for Mr. Foster. He has gone there to see Colonel Stanley."

Frank ran out, and, meeting Sam in the court carrying a bucket of water, hastily gave the order. Then he went in search of Anna and Harry

They were both sitting on the ladder, apparently afraid to venture into the house.

"Is she dead?" asked Anna in a trembling whisper.

"I don't think so. Sam has gone for the doctor," answered Frank. "Well, this is a business! What'll Mother say?"

"What'll Grandpapa say?" echoed Harry, who looked much frightened at the consequences of his behaviour. "I believe he'll thrash us. He's awful when he's angry."

"I'd be glad enough to take the licking if it made Nellie all right," said Frank sadly.

"But look here, we needn't tell it was our blame," said Harry. "It wasn't anyway, for it was Anna I was chasing, and Nellie needn't have run away."

"I should think you would be too sorry to tell a lie about it, Harry," said Anna indignantly. "I don't believe you care a bit though Nellie is hurt."

"Care! He cares for nothing in the world but his precious self. I hope Grandpapa'll give you a good licking, Harry," said Frank, with infinite contempt "You're the meanest little beggar in the world!"

CHAPTER VII

A BAYARD

NELLIE'S injuries happily were not serious. The soft straw had broken her fall, but the child's nervous system had sustained a severe shock from which she would not recover for some time. It was not thought necessary, however, to send for her father and mother, nor to alarm them by a serious report, for the doctor hoped that a few weeks of pure Sunnycroft air and Miss Foster's nursing would make her all right again. Aunt Ellen was, indeed, a famous nurse. No step could be so light as hers, no voice so low and soothing, no hands so gentle and tender at a sick-bed. Anna wondered that they had ever thought her stern and unlovable. Grandpapa was not so "awful" in his anger as Harry had dreaded; but he was much displeased, and talked very seriously to both the boys. Frank was quite willing to share the blame, for if he had not taken part in chasing the rat it would have at once escaped and the accident would not have happened. Harry did not like to be found fault with, because at home he was so seldom blamed for anything, and his father so readily and indulgently shielded him from the consequences of any fault. But there was no favour shown to him at Sunnycroft, and had Grandpapa known the true circumstances of Nellie's accident he would undoubtedly have punished Harry more severely. But Frank, with

his usual generosity, had held his peace, though perhaps this was not always the right thing to do.

Nellie's illness cast a little gloom over Sunnycroft for a few days, and the boys crept about rather quietly; but as she began to gather strength, and the impression of Grandpapa's rebuke passed away from the boys' hearts, they were able to frolic as usual. They were now forbidden to play in the outhouses, for Grandpapa and Aunt Ellen were in a state of perpetual alarm lest any new accident should occur; but there was now plenty to interest and amuse out-of-doors, for harvest had begun in the sheltered valley where Sunnycroft stood, and all the fields on Poplar Farm were ripe for the sickle. Such a harvest too! The country folks said there had never been such crops, and if only the fine weather continued, every barn-yard would be full. Hearing Grandpapa and Aunt Ellen discussing the harvest prospects at Poplar Farm one morning at breakfast, Frank at once made up his mind that he and Harry would pay a visit to the farm that day in order to see if they could find anything new to interest them there. Accordingly, whenever they were out-of-doors they turned their steps away by the brook and the woodland path to Poplar Farm. When they came within sight of the house they saw that the reapers were busy in the big field just below the poplar copse, and the pleasant "whirr" of the reaping-machine mingled with the twittering of the birds, and the hum of the bees as they flitted from blossom to blossom, busy with their harvest too. Now neither Frank nor Harry had ever seen a reaping-machine before, consequently they felt

rather interested in it. They stood a little while at the open gate, watching the wonderful thing at work. It seemed to them so strange to see the big sharp teeth of the knife cutting down the corn, and to watch how neatly and quickly Mr. Hurst laid it off on to the ground with his rake. They would have liked to venture nearer, but, truth to tell, Sam Nuggins had given them such an account of Mr. Hurst's terrible temper that they were a little afraid.

"I say, Frank, what's yon little girl doing with the rake over yonder?" asked Harry, pointing to a very small girl laboriously dragging a wooden rake after her across the field.

"I don't know; let's go and see," said Frank.

"But Mr. Hurst," said Harry doubtfully; "he'll chase us, Sam said so."

"No, he won't, 'cos he's too busy. Besides, we could run faster than him and get over the fence, and he couldn't meddle us in Grandpa's woods," said Frank. "Come on."

So the two small figures marched boldly into the field and made their way to the little girl with the rake. She was a very little girl, and she looked quite slim and delicate, and the meek little face under the pink sun-bonnet was very sad.

"What are you doing, little girl?" asked Frank, who was spokesman as usual.

"Raking up the corn," answered the child simply, and cast a somewhat nervous glance towards the reaping-machine.

"Aren't you hot and tired, and isn't it poky trailing that thing up and down?" queried Frank.

"Yes," answered the child, and somewhat wearily drew her hand across her brow.

"Why do you do it? Come on and play with us," suggested Frank.

"Oh no, I couldn't! Uncle Jacob would be angry, and Aunt Rebecca too," said the child, and began to rake up the ears of corn again.

"Do you mean Mr. and Mrs. Hurst?" asked Frank.

The child nodded.

"How long have you to keep on doing it?" was the next question.

"All day till the reapers stop at sundown," answered the child, and her eyes filled with tears.

"What a shame!" said Frank indignantly. "Why don't you run away? Why do they make you do it?"

"Uncle Jacob says I have to work for my food. You see Father and Mother are dead, and I live here now," explained the child, as if grateful for Frank's sympathy.

"What's your name?"

"Mary Archer. Uncle and Aunt call me Poll and Polly. I wish you'd go away. I'm sure Uncle Jacob's angry, I see him looking," said the child nervously. Frank looked at the sweet tired face and then at the burly form of Jacob Hurst, and felt indignant and almost strong enough to knock him down. "I'll tell you what, I'll rake up the corn, I'm bigger than you," he said. "You go and sit with Harry over at the hedge."

"Or come to the brook and I'll let you see ever so

many fishes," said Harry graciously, forgetting to be selfish for once.

The child's eyes danced, but she looked doubtfully at her uncle and then shook her head.

"I'm afraid of Uncle Jacob."

"I'll tell you what, then, I'll go and ask him—there!" said Frank; and lest a moment's hesitation should rob him of his courage he marched boldly over to the reaping-machine. Perceiving that the squire's grandson (whom he knew very well by sight) was coming to speak to him, the farmer called to his man to stop the horses, and then he turned his face enquiringly to Frank. It was not by any means a pleasant face, and his eyes especially were singularly hard and unkind in their expression.

"Please, sir, will you let me rake up your field instead of Mary; she's tired and I'm not," was Frank's salutation.

"Hulloa! has Polly been complaining, eh?" said the farmer very gruffly. "'Tain't hard work pullin' that toy back and forrard, I'm sure, for a great girl like her."

"She's not so big as ~~me~~, Mr. Hurst, and I'm a boy. I'd like to do it, please ~~let me~~," pleaded Frank eagerly. A slow dry smile overspread the stern, rugged, weather-beaten face of Jacob Hurst.

"Well, ~~see here~~, young sir, Polly shall hev a holid-ay if you ~~work her day's~~ work for her, and take your bread and chocso with the rest at noon, and never stop till six o'clock," he said, as if bent on making a joke of it. "I guess you won't be so ready offerin' help lazy gels after that."

"All right! I'll work on till six o'clock, and Mary'll do nothing, mind; it's her holiday," cried Frank gleefully, and ran off to impart the joyful news to the weary little maiden patiently raking up the stray heads of corn the binders had left behind. Polly was not at all reluctant to give up her work, and ran off contentedly to the woods with Harry. There was no constraint between them, for children very quickly form acquaintance with each other.

The light hand-rake which Frank had in his hand was intended to take the place of the gleaner who used to follow the reapers in the days when the sickle was in use, and with it he had to rake together all the stray ears into little heaps, which were afterwards carried home and used as food for poultry. For a while the novelty of the thing quite interested him, and he enjoyed it immensely; but very soon that wore off, and he began to grow hot and uncomfortable, for there was no shelter from the burning sun, and often his eyes turned longingly to the cool shelter of the woods, where he pictured his brother and the little maiden he had so manfully relieved having a good time by the brook. At length the reapers stopped work, and then Mrs. Hurst came carrying huge baskets of bread and cheese, and foaming tankards of ale, which formed the mid-day meal. Frank was hungry enough to enjoy his bread and cheese, and he sat very contentedly under a stook and ate it, taking no heed of what the work-folk said to him, because he could scarcely understand a word of their quaint Cumberland dialect. Half an hour only was allowed for rest and refreshment, and then to work

again, for, as Jacob Hurst said grimly, every minute was precious in harvest.

Frank had scarcely begun his work again when Polly came into the field and told him that Harry was away home to his dinner, and offered to relieve Frank of his self-inflicted work. For a moment the vision of the tempting repast spread in Grandpapa's pleasant dining-room nearly overcame Frank; but as he had passed his word to Mr. Hurst, and was determined that poor, tired, hard-worked Polly should have a complete holiday, he bravely resisted and manfully went on with his work. It was a long, dreary, trying afternoon, but it had its uses, for it gave Frank some idea of what many others less blessed than he had to endure. Farmer Hurst grimly watched the boy, and was amazed at his perseverance. He had not expected him to stay more than an hour on the field.

Polly fell asleep under the hedgerow, and had the rest she sorely needed; and Frank, with flushed face and aching head, tramped up and down after the reapers, leaving many neat little heaps behind him. But he was a thankful and happy boy when at last Farmer Hurst gave the signal to stop, and just then the echo of Aunt Ellen's six-o'clock tea bell came pealing through the quiet air.

Without waiting a moment after the machine stopped, Frank threw down the rake and ran off through the woods to the manor. Of course Harry had carried the story home, and both Grandpapa and Aunt Ellen had laughed heartily, and the latter had ordered cook to keep some dinner hot for Frank, thinking he would

be home very shortly. Like Mr. Hurst they were quite amazed at the boy's perseverance. They were all seated at tea when Frank marched into the dining-



room, looking as if he could eat up everything on the table.

"Hullo, my boy, have you been aiding distressed beauty, eh?" asked Grandpapa with a twinkle in his eye.

"Don't, Grandpa. Will you give me some tea, Aunt Ellen, please," said Frank quickly.

"I didn't mean to tease you, Frank," said Grand-

papa more seriously. "I am very proud of what you did to-day. It shows a manly and noble spirit which I wish was more cultivated among boys. It is a shame the way Hurst and his wife treat that orphan child, and I am very glad to think you had so much feeling for a fellow-creature, especially for a girl."

"Yes, you are quite a Bayard, Frank," said Aunt Ellen, as she handed him his tea. Frank did not know what a Bayard meant, but he was quite sure it must be a good thing, because Aunt Ellen's face wore such a kind and tender smile.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HARVEST FESTIVAL

HARVEST was progressing very fast on Poplar Farm. The boys spent much of their time there now, for grim Jacob Hurst had taken an odd fancy to Frank, and encouraged him in his gruff way to come about the farm. He was also a great favourite with Aunt Rebecca, and she permitted him to march in and out of the farmhouse as he pleased. Frank's generous bearing of Polly's burden that day in the harvest-field had not been unproductive of good, for the child was no longer oppressed, and was allowed to run with the boys from the manor as much as she pleased. And Polly was by no means ungrateful to Frank for all she owed to him.

As may be imagined, the boys, especially Frank,

very soon became quite familiar with every description of farm work, and speedily picked up a great many phrases and words relating to agricultural matters, which, falling glibly from their lips, were highly amusing to Grandpapa and Aunt Ellen.

By the middle of July every field was cut down and standing in stooks, and then began the work of driving it home to the barn-yard. That was famous fun for the two Lufford boys, and they were never seen at the manor from morning till night.

Frank came home in a great state of excitement one night, announcing that there was to be a great feast up at Poplar Farm when the last sheaf was safely ingathered to the barn-yard. Of course Mr. Hurst had invited him and Harry; would Grandpapa let them go? Supper was to be served in the barn, which was to be decorated with ears of corn and green boughs to hide the bare discoloured walls.

Grandpapa laughed, and said he would see; and when he did that they knew they would be allowed to go.

Now, although Mr. Hurst was a very hard man, he did not grudge the harvest feast; and when Frank and Harry came into the barn, where Mrs. Hurst and the maids were setting the tables, they stood amazed at the weight of good things, and wondered how they could ever get all eaten up.

"Wait till nine o'clock's over, Master Frank, and see how much'll be left," laughed Mrs. Hurst. "Now, where's that Polly away to? I want her to help carry things in. That child's never at hand when she's wanted."

"I'm here, Aunt Rebecca," said a meek small voice

at her elbow. "I've been here all the time, only you didn't see me."

"Well, well, gracious me! can't you grow bigger so's people'll see you?" she said ungraciously. "Run and see if the potatoes are boiling, and then come back here double quick."

"Here's some of them coming up the road, Mrs. Hurst," cried Frank in great glee; "and the girls have got corn and poppies in their hair. How fine they are!"

"Ay, ay, nothing but dress and nonsense in their heads," said the farmer's wife grimly. "Just look out, Master Frank, and see if Hurst is about. This table's not firm. The least jolt'll set it over, and then it'll be a spill

Frank ran out to look for the farmer, and when the table was set to rights the company had begun to arrive.

The boys from the manor were provided with seats up at the head of the table beside Mr. Hurst, and they were so intent on watching the others eating that they were quite heedless of their own well-filled plates. Frank was perfectly astounded at the appetites of the labourers, and watched with intense interest while they made plateful after plateful of meat and pies and puddings disappear. It soon became no longer a mystery to him how the feast was to be eaten, though he did wonder where they could put so much. After supper they adjourned to the granary to dance. The first dance was the old-fashioned Haymakers, into the mysteries of which Mrs. Hurst insisted upon initiating Frank. Both the farmer and his wife unbent from their stern and

rigid demeanour once a year, and it was on the night of the harvest festival. Harry, who was much too nice and proud to mingle so freely with work-people, sat back and looked on, while Frank enjoyed the fun and laughed with all his might at the queer figure Mrs. Hurst and he cut dancing together. They soon grew tired of the dancing, however, and the place, lit by candles and naphtha-lamps without globes or shades, began to be very hot and stuffy, so Frank was glad to slip away downstairs to the cooler barn below. Harry joined him, and they sat down on the bottom step of the stair to cool themselves.

"What do you suppose those things are made of?" asked Frank, pointing to the flaring naphtha lights on the walls.

"Don't know. Let's get one down and see," suggested Harry; "and, oh, let's get two and take them outside and play at a torchlight procession like they had at Manchester when we were there!"

Frank quite caught at the idea, and, climbing on one of the tables, easily unfastened two of the torches, with which they marched unobserved triumphantly out-of-doors.

It was now quite dark, and a brisk southerly breeze had sprung up and was blowing among the poplars, and making quite a wailing round the gables of the old house. Perfectly unconscious of the danger of carrying naked lights outside in such a wind, when everything was as dry as tinder, the boys marched up and down the yard quite delighted with themselves, and waving their torches backwards and forwards in no small glee.

"Oh my, what fun! Let's go away round by the stacks and up to yon little hill at the paddock gate. You can see it from Sunnycroft," said Frank. "And if Grandpa or Aunt Ellen sees our lights they'll wonder what they are."

"All right—come on!" said Harry. So away they marched, singing "Tramp! tramp!" and waving time with their torches. They walked straight through the middle of the stacks right into the paddock at the head of the barn-yard, and stood there holding their torches high up in the air, so that they might be seen from the windows of Sunnycroft if anyone chanced to be looking out. The wind was very boisterous where they stood, for there was no shelter in the direction from which it was blowing, and presently a sudden gust blew Harry's torch from his hand and carried it right against a great stack of last year's straw which had been removed from the barn-yard and loosely piled up beside the paddock gate to make room for the new grain. Then a terrible thing happened, and in a moment a fierce bright flame of fire shot upward to the starlit sky. In horror and dismay Frank dropped his torch and set his foot upon it, and they stood as if unable to move, watching the progress of the fire. Presently the light was seen from the granary windows, and the merry-makers came trooping out with exclamations of dismay and apprehension, for the burning straw endangered the entire stackyard.

"Let's go home, Frank," said Harry, shaking with fear; "come on home, and they'll never know we did it."

"Stupid! they'll find the torches and guess," said Frank. "We'll be put in jail for setting fire to people's property. How will you like that?"



"If we run home ever so quick and say we didn't know anything about it, it'll be all right. Oh, come on!" cried Harry in a perfect agony of apprehension. Frank stood for a moment looking at the wild confusion in the barn-yard, watching them throwing water, but apparently in vain, on the burning straw, and listening to the hoarse voices of the men and the

shrill cries of the women, who seemed in a wild state of alarm lest the entire homestead should be burned to the ground; and indeed it looked as if that were no very unlikely consequence. Frank, seeing the serious state of affairs, began to tremble also, and for once his fearless courage deserted him.

"Come on, then—let's run as fast as we can," he said hurriedly. "Perhaps they'll never know."

So the culprits ran off like hunted things, and were home at the manor before they were missed at the farm. They found the house very quiet; both Anna and baby were in bed, and Grandpapa and Aunt Ellen had gone to dine at Dunstanley, and would not be home till late. Mary came to see about getting them to bed, and asked a great many questions about the festival; but as she did not get very satisfactory answers she concluded that they had not enjoyed themselves very well, and were glad to get home. You may imagine neither of them slept. Lying awake in bed they heard when the alarm of the fire was given by Heaton, who saw it when he crossed from his house to the stable about eleven o'clock. Then Frank jumped up, and, looking out of the window, saw the red glare in the sky just above Poplar Farm, and could even hear the din of voices above the sighing of the wind. He had really never felt so miserable in his life. Harry was lying curled up in bed with the clothes pulled right over his head, as if to protect him from the consequences of their conduct.

When Frank heard the carriage-wheels on the avenue he crept into bed again, and listened with strained ears to hear if anything was said about the fire.

"We are late, Sarah," he heard Aunt Ellen's voice say. "We drove round by the farm to see if it was a serious fire. We saw the light from the drawing-room windows at Dunstanley."

"And is it serious, ma'am?" Sarah asked.

"Bad enough—two stacks have been burned to the ground," Aunt Ellen answered. "It was quite fortunate that the people were all at the festival. They rendered such efficient help that the fire is almost out."

"Yes, ma'am; so we saw from the tower window," Sarah said then. "How did it happen?"

"They don't know, but think it was a spark from someone's pipe. They were smoking outside, it seems, and everything is so dry that it kindled with a spark. Are the boys home?"

"Oh yes, ma'am—in bed and asleep an hour ago! If they'd known of the fire they'd have been there yet."

"Ah! I am relieved to hear they are safely in bed," said Miss Foster. "The squire was just a little afraid that it might have been some of their mischief."

Then Frank heard Aunt Ellen come upstairs and go to her own room. He pulled the coverlet over his head—not in fear, like Harry, but to hide the rush of shame which came to his face and dyed it red.

CHAPTER IX

WHAT CAME OF IT

WHEN Frank awoke next morning he knew there was something wrong, though it was a little time before he could remember what it was. He got up, and, looking out of the window, felt quite glad that it was raining, for bright skies and sunshine would have been out of keeping with his sombre thoughts. He did not make his usual haste in dressing, for he felt that he could not go downstairs and face Grandpapa and Aunt Ellen unless he just told them all about it. When he was brushing his hair Harry awoke and looked up sleepily.

"Say, Frank, you won't tell, mind, or we'll be put in jail," he said anxiously. "There's no harm in letting them think it was a spark from some of their pipes. It might have been that anyway."

"I don't know, I can't keep on feeling like this. I'd rather go to jail, I believe, than be so miserable," Frank answered. "I know that if Grandpapa asks me anything about it, I'll just tell him we did it."

"Then you're a mean sneak," was Harry's peevish answer. "I won't tell anyway, and I hope Grandpapa won't ask anything about it."

Frank sighed and went away downstairs with a very sober face. There was nobody in the dining-room though breakfast was on the table, but in a few minutes Grandpapa came in, and was followed immediately by Aunt Ellen and Anna. Nellie still

breakfasted in Aunt Ellen's room, where she had slept since her accident. Just as they sat down to breakfast the letter-bag was brought in, and both the boys felt relieved to see what a number of letters there were for both Grandpapa and Aunt Ellen, because their attention was occupied during breakfast. But Grandpapa had not forgotten about the fire.

"Did you know there was a fire at Poplar Farm last night, boys?" he asked, without looking at them, for he was turning over his letters.

"Yes, Grandpapa, we saw it from the bedroom window," Harry answered readily.

"Did you? Then there was no word of it before you left?" said Grandpapa a trifle absently.

"No, Grandpapa," Harry answered quite boldly; but Frank hung down his head and felt like to sink with shame. For by holding his tongue was he not acting the lie, which was quite as sinful as uttering it with his lips.

"Ah! I'm glad of that. I was afraid you might have had a hand in it," said Grandpapa in a satisfied voice. "I am sorry for poor Hurst. He has lost two of his finest stacks, which, of course, are not insured. Well, my dear," he added, turning to his daughter, "What news have you this morning?"

Then the conversation turned upon other topics, and the fire was not again referred to. Aunt Ellen, being much interested in her letters, did not particularly observe Frank, though she noticed that he did not make a hearty breakfast.

"Harvest festivals and late hours don't agree with small boys, I see," she said pleasantly. "I am afraid

you had too many of Mrs. Hurst's puddings last night, Frank, you are making such a poor breakfast."

"Oh no, thank you! I am all right, Aunt Ellen," Frank answered with a sickly smile; while Harry vigorously kicked his foot under the table, in terror lest Frank should confess.

By the time breakfast was over the rain had ceased, and the gray sky was breaking overhead. It had only been a sweet passing shower, which had refreshed everything and washed the dust from the grass and the trees till they were almost as lovely as in spring. Frank wandered disconsolately out-of-doors and stood on the gravel with his hands in his pockets, looking as if he did not know what to make of himself.

Grandpapa was going to the neighbouring town and had a seat in the dog-cart for one boy, and as Frank had been there last time it was Harry's turn. Frank saw them ride away without feeling the usual pang of envy, for there was nothing more delightful than to go driving with Grandpapa, who was never bored by boys' talk, but answered readily all the questions they liked to ask. When the dog-cart was lost to sight Frank wandered round to the back and watched Aunt Ellen feeding her poultry; but he couldn't even laugh at the bold efforts of the little bantam to steal big chanticleer's breakfast from under his very eyes.

"I think you are not very well, my boy," said Aunt Ellen, looking kindly at him, for it was so unlike Frank to steal about quietly without uttering a word.

"Oh, I'm all right, Aunt Ellen," Frank repeated,

and, turning away, sauntered into the stables. About an hour after that, when Aunt Ellen was sitting with her work-basket at the open window of the dining-room, Frank came in and sat down beside her.

"Aunt Ellen."

"Yes, dear."

"May I ask you something?"

"Certainly."

"Do you think it is as bad a thing to think a lie in your mind as to tell one right out?"

"Do you mean to act a lie, Frank?"

"Yes, Auntie, I mean if you make people think a thing is so without just saying it is."

"Yes, dear, I quite understand you," answered Aunt Ellen gravely. "And in the sight of God acting a lie is the same as uttering it. You know he judges our hearts and knows all our thoughts."

"Aunt Ellen, suppose I had done that, would God ever forgive me?"

"Assuredly he would, Frank, if you were truly penitent," answered Aunt Ellen, and guessed that the boy was on the brink of some confession.

"I don't suppose a Bayard would do that—act a lie, I mean, Aunt Ellen?" said Frank wistfully.

"No, he would scorn to do it. A true soldier of Jesus Christ would be afraid to be such a coward, Frank."

"Then I am not a Bayard, for I did it, Aunt Ellen. It wasn't sparks from their pipes at all that made the fire at the farm. It was Harry and me. We took down lamps from the barn wall and went outside to play a torchlight procession, and it was windy and

Harry's blew away, and the straw took fire," cried Frank in a great burst of tears. "Then we ran home and went to bed, and we didn't mean to tell, but I couldn't keep on not telling, I felt so bad in my mind. Oh, Aunt Ellen, do you think God and Grandpapa will be very angry? I am so sorry, and I am quite willing to go to jail if Farmer Hurst tells the magistrate."

In spite of herself a smile shone through the gravity on Aunt Ellen's face. "My dear boy, you have been guilty of a very serious fault, for which either Grandpapa or your father will have to pay," she said seriously. "But I am very thankful, Frank, that you have told the truth, though I expected you would have been too brave to act a lie even for one night."

"Oh, Aunt Ellen, I'll never do it again as long as I live!" cried Frank penitently. "And when I grow up I'll work for money to pay back Papa, if he has to pay Farmer Hurst for the stacks."

"Grandpapa will be very angry, especially with Harry, for telling such a downright falsehood this morning," said Aunt Ellen. "There is nothing so annoys him as deceit or falsehood."

"What a lot of wrong things we have done since we came! I'm sure I couldn't count them," said Frank dolefully. "But I hope Grandpapa'll lick us both, 'cos it's easier than having him look sorrowful like you do, and like Mamma does when we vex her."

Aunt Ellen's eyes filled with tears. Her heart went out to the boy before her, and she loved him for his quick sensitiveness and his strugglings after all

things good. Some day he would be a noble and good man, who would do honour to the Master he was striving even now, in his feeble, boyish way, to follow. She leaned forward and kissed him, saying softly:

"I believe Grandpapa will not be very hard upon you, Frank. He will guess you have suffered a good deal already."

.
Grandpapa was very angry, and in spite of all his daughter's remonstrances insisted that the two boys should be immediately sent home. He took them first over to Poplar Farm, and made them apologize to Farmer Hurst, to whom he promised to refund the value of the burnt grain. His unflinching sternness, however, was a wholesome lesson to them both, especially to Harry, who had so frequently escaped deserved punishment at home. Thus the holidays at Sunnycroft were abruptly terminated for Frank and Harry; and they were sent home in disgrace, Anna and Nellie remaining behind.

Of course Mother heard the whole story from Frank's lips, and she spoke some gentle loving words which he never forgot.

And Frank resolved that if he were spared to go another year to Sunnycroft, he would do his best to atone to Grandpapa and Aunt Ellen for the trouble he had caused them both.

A YEAR AT COVERLEY

CHAPTER I

NEWS

THE young Raynes thought there could not be, all the world over, so dear and beautiful a spot as Coverley. Other people did not think it such a desirable place, though it had a lovely situation and was so picturesque to look at, but the five Raynes thought it quite perfect in every respect; and most assuredly there never was a home so well fitted for all the needs and pleasures of childhood. It had a great wild garden which nobody ever cultivated, and in which each child had a plot; and which opened out into a large paddock where Bobby, the old pony, browsed peacefully when he was not in requisition for driving or riding.

The father of the Raynes was a physician with a large practice, but he was not a rich man. Their mother was—well, just Mother; I need not say any more.

Hubert, the eldest of the five, was at Eton; then

came Mabel, a gentle-eyed, sweet-tempered girl of twelve; then Charlie, a good-natured, rather stupid boy, whom everybody liked; then Sunbeam, or Katherina Mary, as she would say with great dignity sometimes, a wild, laughing, sunny-hearted sprite, brimming over with happiness and love to every human being. Then there was a fat baby just able to toddle alone. So now you have been introduced to all the Raynes, and I will go on with my story.

On a raw damp January morning Dr. and Mrs. Rayne were alone together in the dining-room. Breakfast was over, and the children were in the school-room with their governess. Mrs. Rayne was sitting at the table looking at an open letter with an anxious and perplexed expression on her sweet motherly face. The doctor was standing on the hearth looking expectantly at his wife, as if waiting, and waiting with very remarkable patience, for her to say something.

"Well, Mamma?" he said presently, in a slightly questioning tone.

"I suppose they must come," said Mrs. Rayne, with a half-sigh. "In fact we are given no alternative. William simply says the doctors order a voyage to Australia for Marion, and that the children will be sent here on Monday."

Dr. Rayne laughed.

"That is William's way, dear. Read a little further, his offer is very liberal."

"So I see; but it will upset this house, I fear," said Mrs. Rayne. "I remember Louis and Fanny as very spoiled children five years ago. What if they

don't agree with our little ones, Papa? and they will be here a year at any rate."

"Don't worry, dear; let the poor little mortals come. You will do them good if anybody can, and children's quarrels are only summer squalls. Well, I must run; good-morning!" said Dr. Rayne in his light-hearted way, and, stooping to kiss his wife, went off on his rounds.

Mrs. Rayne sat quite ten minutes after her husband left her, thinking over the letter, and the advent of two strangers into her home. She was not pleased about it, for there was sufficient work in the house already for herself and the two maids, and the little Vernons had been accustomed all their lives to every luxury that money could buy.

Mr. Vernon was Mr. Rayne's cousin, and the owner of a large estate in Herefordshire, where he seldom resided owing to his wife's delicate health. The weak ailing mother had been unable to give any training to her children, and Mr. Vernon could see no faults in them, nor any need for correction; consequently they had grown up self-willed, idle, and quarrelsome. Never having had a whim or fancy crossed in their short lives, they could not brook contradiction, and were the very plague of the servants' lives at Vernon Lee. Mrs. Rayne knew all this very well, so it was no wonder that she did not regard their coming with pleasure. By and by she rose, folded up the letter, rang the bell for Ellen to remove the breakfast tray, and went upstairs to the school-room.

Mabel was practising her music, but paused at this unusual visit. At the table Miss King was giving

Charlie and Kitty a history lesson, which she, too, stopped when Mrs. Rayne entered the room. The governess was a woman past her early youth, very plain-featured and uninteresting in appearance, but she was an accomplished teacher, and a person of kindly yet firm disposition. She was much respected by Dr. and Mrs. Rayne, and the children had learned to love her during the four years she had been with them.

"Excuse me for interrupting you, Miss King, but I have just come to tell you that you will have two additions to your scholars next week. Mabel, dear, your cousins, Louis and Fanny, are coming from Vernon Lee on Monday," said Mrs. Rayne.

"Will they remain a long time, Mamma?" asked Mabel.

"About a year, I think. Poor Aunt Marion is very ill, and Uncle William is going to take her to Australia, as the doctors recommend a long sea voyage. So, as Louis and Fanny cannot go they are coming to us."

"Oh, Mamma, how jolly!" cried Charlie. "Louis will do for me to play with. How old is he?"

"About thirteen, dear? Fanny is eleven. Miss King, we can talk this matter over again," she added to the governess. "There will have to be some new arrangement about the lessons, so as to make as little difference as possible to you."

"I shall be quite pleased with my two new pupils, Mrs. Rayne," replied the governess, grateful for Mrs. Rayne's never-failing consideration. They will make very little difference, as they are all nearly of an age. It is as easy to give a lesson to four as to two."

Mrs. Rayne smiled, and laid her hand a moment on the shoulder of the governess.

"You are a great help and comfort to me, Miss King," she said in her gentle way, which, to the governess, was sufficient reward. "Well, I must go and see about rooms for the strangers. I think Miss King will give you a half-holiday to-day. I shall want you to go to Arnborough with me after dinner, Mabel."

Then she went away, and Miss King continued her lessons. But the thoughts of the pupils wandered, in spite of themselves, to the event that was to make such a difference to Coverley.

CHAPTER II

THE NEW ARRIVALS

THERE was great excitement at Coverley on Monday evening, when the travellers were expected from Herefordshire. Tea was delayed an hour on their account, so that Baby and Kitty were in bed, and only Mabel and Charlie were waiting with Mrs. Rayne in the dining-room when the dog-cart drove up to the door.

Mrs. Rayne immediately hurried out to the hall, and Charlie, unable to restrain his excitement, began to walk restlessly up and down the floor. Nothing ever excited Mabel; she possessed one of the calmest and most equable temperaments in the world, and she

sat quite still on her chair, laughing at Charlie's exhibition of restlessness.

In a few minutes Mrs. Rayne re-entered the dining-room, leading by the hand a little girl wrapped up in costly furs, so closely and warmly that only the tip of her nose and a pair of rather weak-looking blue eyes were visible. Behind came a lad quite as tall as Hubert, who prided himself on his height, but much more slenderly built.

"Mabel, dear, here are Louis and Fanny. You will make friends with my little ones, dear," she added to Fanny, and beginning at once to unfasten her wraps.

Mabel came forward with outstretched hand, and offered to kiss Fanny, but she drew back petulantly, shook off Mrs. Rayne's hand, and tossed her fur cloak to the floor.

Meanwhile Louis had given the tips of his fingers patronizingly to Charlie, and then offered them to Mabel.

"Are you going to have tea now? how funny! We dine at eight at home," he said, glancing rather contemptuously at the table. "I am frightfully hungry. Will it be long, Aunt Emily?"

"No, dear; in just a few minutes. You had better come upstairs with me, and I shall show you your room, and you can remove your boots."

"All right; hurry up!" he said familiarly, and stalked out of the room, followed by Mrs. Rayne and Fanny, and leaving Charlie and Mabel in a state of considerable astonishment.

"Oh, I say, Mab!" began Charlie; but, finding words quite inadequate for his feelings, gave vent to

a long whistle, and finally executed a kind of war-dance round the table.

In about a quarter of an hour Louis reappeared,



and, going over to the hearth, drew in a chair just in front, and took up all the fireplace.

"I say, this is surely Greenland; what a wretched old thing that is we came up from the station in! Why doesn't Uncle Hubert get a carriage?"

"Ask him," said Charlie expressively, and giving Mabel a look that nearly upset her gravity.

"You are quite a young lady, Cousin Mabel, and rather pretty," continued the precocious youth, leaning back in his chair and fixing his eyes critically on Mabel's fair face. "Isn't there a brother older than you?"

"Yes, Hubert; he is at Eton," replied Mabel a little dryly, not being greatly impressed by her cousin's manner.

"I hope Uncle Hubert will bring him home jolly soon, anyway, or I shall not be able to support life without a chum."

Just then Dr. Rayne entered the room and glanced at the lad in the chair with a curious look in his eyes.

"Hulloa, young man! monarch of all you survey, eh? but it won't do; there are other monarchs in Coverley, and we go by shares, so move round a little. Where's Mamma? are we to have any tea, I wonder?"

"Here's Mamma, and tea too," said Mrs. Rayne's pleasant voice; and she entered the room followed by Fanny, and they all took their places at the table. Now that her cousin was divested of her outer wraps Mabel got a good look at her. She was tall for her age, and dressed too richly and elaborately for a child. She looked delicate, and her face wore a discontented, peevish expression that marred any beauty it might have possessed. She sat perfectly silent during the meal; but Louis talked so much and so boastingly that his uncle had to administer a mild reproof, whereat he coloured up and answered in a hasty and unbecoming manner. Dr. Rayne said nothing, only his mouth became very stern, and his

own children knew he was angry. Louis Vernon was supremely indifferent whether he had offended or not, but he was to learn very soon that obedience and respect were among the lessons taught at Coverley.

All were glad when the meal was at an end, and Mrs. Rayne took Fanny up to bed at once. She was to share Mabel's room—which was rather a trial to Mabel, though she would not for worlds have hinted to her mother that she felt about it at all. Mabel Rayne was by nature and habit so unselfish and thoughtful that she would suffer all kinds of inconveniences herself rather than inconvenience others.

Finding the dining-room not altogether to his liking, Louis very shortly followed his sister's example and went up to his own room. Charlie and Mabel lingered a little while, anxious to hear a little more about the strangers.

"He isn't any use for me," said Charlie, so dolefully that his father laughed. "He isn't half such fun as Hubert, and he is fourteen."

"They are both old for their years, but they have never had any society except their own," replied the doctor; "perhaps they will improve at Coverley. Now off to bed; it's half-past nine, see! Good-night!"

Both children, not dreaming of begging to sit up a little longer, bade Papa and Mamma good-night, and went off together. Half-way upstairs they sat down on a step and looked at each other blankly for a moment. Then Charlie laughed.

"Pokey, isn't it, Mab?"

"Very," was her brief but expressive reply.

"Louis is a prig, a worse one than Jimmy Walton, Hubert fetched with him from Eton two years ago. What'll I do?"

"What'll I do?" repeated Mabel dismally; "you don't have to have him in your room at nights, and I have to give Fanny half of mine."

"Never mind," said Charlie reassuringly; "but I say, our good times are all over—I feel it. Well, I'm off; there's Papa at the dining-room door; good-night!"

Mabel nodded, and, running lightly up the steps, entered her own room. The gas was lowered, and she did not turn it up for fear of waking her cousin. Stealing softly over to the side of the bed, before she began to undress, she held back the curtain and looked at her. She was asleep, and her face was pleasant, pretty almost in its expression of perfect peace. There were traces of tears on her cheeks, and somehow Mabel's kind heart went out in a rush of pity and tenderness to the poor child who had cried herself to sleep, doubtless thinking of her mother.

"I will be good to her," she whispered softly to herself; "poor Fanny! I wonder how I should feel if it were my precious mamma who had gone to Australia. Yes, I'll be as kind to her as I can."

And Mabel kept her word.

CHAPTER III

THE NEXT MORNING

EIGHT o'clock was the breakfast hour at Coverley. At half-past seven Ellen knocked at Mabel's door, and she jumped up at once, knowing by experience that every minute spent in bed after awaking made it the harder to get up.

It was nearly dark in the room, and very cold, for it was the depth of winter. She ran across the floor, drew up the blind, and then stood still, uttering a little cry of delight. Snow had fallen in the night, and it was lying quite three inches deep, while every hedge and tree had its pure and graceful covering, and even the ivy had a lovely fretwork of frosted snow on the leaves. Away down in the hollow the clustering roofs of Gaythorpe lay white and dazzling in the clear light of the new day; and the whole world about Coverley was as fair and beautiful a picture as eyes could wish to see.

"Oh, I say, Cousin Fanny, do get up and see the snow!" she cried. "You never saw anything so lovely in your life. We shall have some fun to-day."

Fanny opened her sleepy eyes, and looked round rather ungraciously. "Why did you wake me? I hate snow, it is so frightfully cold. I'm sure it must be in the night yet, it is so dark."

"No, indeed, it is twenty minutes to eight, and

the first bell will ring for breakfast in a quarter of an hour. Aren't you going to get up?"

"At this time! no, thank you!" said Fanny, pulling the clothes up round her neck. "At home we didn't breakfast till ten, sometimes eleven."

"Why, we are thinking of dinner at eleven," laughed Mabel. "And we begin lessons at nine. However, I dare say Mamma won't mind though you are late this morning; you must be tired."

There was no response, and presently Fanny was sound asleep again.

Mabel got on her things hurriedly, for it was certainly very cold, and then, pouring some water into the basin, plunged face and hands into it with great good-will. When that was over she was as fresh as a daisy. While she was brushing her hair there came a tiny tap to the door. "May I come in, Mab?" asked the sweet ringing tones of a child's voice.

"Yes, dear," and in a moment Kitty had bounded into the room, and held up her face to be kissed. I wish I could tell you how sweet, and pretty, and delightful to see was Kitty Rayne. She was the beauty of the family, as well as the pet and plaything, and darling of them all. She was just six, and so slightly built that she was like a fairy flitting about the house, and so full of fun and nonsense and merriment that she was a sunbeam as well as a fairy. In fact "Sunbeam" was quite as much her name as Kitty.

"Is that Cousin Fanny?" she whispered, glancing towards the bed. "I came to see her; why doesn't she get up?"

"She's asleep;" said Mabel; and in a moment Kitty was on the top of the bed, pulling down the clothes from her cousin's face, her lovely eyes brimming over with fun.

"Oh, I say, stop! who's that?" said Fanny crossly. "Don't pull all the clothes off, I'm starving of cold."

"Well, get up, it's five minutes to eight, there's the bell," said Kitty serenely. "Oh, Cousin Fanny, what a cross face, I wouldn't kiss you for anything!"

"I don't want you to; get off my bed. Cousin Mabel, I wonder you don't teach your sister better manners," said Fanny, more crossly still. Then Kitty's face fell, and, slipping from the bed, she ran out of the room. Mabel fastened her collar before she spoke.

"You mus'n't mind Kitty, she is so full of fun; she is always doing some queer thing," she said gently. "She would not annoy or hurt you for the world."

"All right! don't let her come in again. Are you away? Tell Aunt Emily I am too sleepy to get up," said Fanny drowsily; and when Mabel looked back at the bed she saw her cousin pull the clothes right over her head and compose herself for another nap.

Breakfast was begun without either of the new members of the family; but towards the end of the meal Louis appeared without a collar on, and he had evidently neglected to brush his hair. Mrs. Rayne noted these things, and resolved to tell him about it quietly later in the day. It was one of the rules at Coverley that all should appear neat and tidy at the breakfast table, Mrs. Rayne herself setting the example. She spoke to him pleasantly, and made room

for him beside her, but Louis was cross and sulky this morning, for what reason was best known to himself, so Mrs. Rayne left him alone, and the others chatted pleasantly together, making plans for the building of snow forts, and expressing many hopes that Coverley Pond would be safe for skating by to-morrow.

"I think we shall have three holidays this week, dears," said Mrs. Rayne, "if Miss King will permit us. And you will have time to show Louis and Fanny all there is to be seen at Coverley and round about."

Charlie clapped his hands, Mabel looked pleased, and Kitty uttered an exclamation of delight. Only Louis preserved his sullen demeanour, and presently rose from the table, and, striding over to the window, began to whistle, greatly to Dr. Rayne's annoyance.

"Run outside if you want to whistle, my boy," he said pleasantly; and Louis stopped immediately, but his face was not pleasant to see.

Presently the children left the dining-room to hunt for their snow-shoes; then Mrs. Rayne went up to Louis and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Are you quite well, dear?" she said in her kind way; "you look so out of sorts."

"Yes, well enough; but I don't think I shall like this place, and I don't see why Papa need have left us in England," he said sullenly, and went away out of the room.

When they were alone Dr. Rayne and his wife looked at each other a moment in silence.

"I am afraid you were right, and I was wrong,

dear, and that William's children will make trouble at Coverley," said the doctor at length.

Mrs. Rayne sighed. Her heart was heavy somehow, she could not tell why.

"I hope not, poor things. They seem very miserable, both of them, and they have been woefully neglected. But we will do our best, and who knows but that, with kind but firm and wise dealing, Coverley may prove the birthplace of a new life for them both."

CHAPTER IV

LOUIS IN TROUBLE

THE Vernons were far behind in their lessons. There had been a tutor at Vernon Lee, but Mr. Vernon did not uphold his authority, and as Louis only learned when he pleased (and that was very seldom indeed), the post had been a sinecure, and teaching hours a myth. Dr. and Mrs. Rayne, after talking the matter over, decided to ask Mr. Tremaine, the rector of Gaythorpe, to take Louis for lessons every day. He was too old to be placed with a governess, even supposing his disposition had been more amiable than it was. Fanny, of course, went to the school-room with the others, but she was so idle and peevish and disobedient that she occasioned Miss King more trouble than all the rest of her pupils combined. Louis made a wry face when he

was told, a week later, that he must walk to the rectory every morning at ten o'clock; but as even in these few days he had learned that he must obey at Coverley, he did not demur.

He altogether ignored Charlie's existence, greatly to that young gentleman's disgust. When he did speak to him it was to address him as "kid" or "youngster", terms which Charlie highly resented, and which tried his good-nature to the utmost. But he did his best not to quarrel with Louis, and kept out of his way as much as possible. Disdaining the society of his cousins, it was natural that Louis Vernon should seek out other companions for himself, and as there were no lads of his own age and station near Coverley he began to associate with Ben Barton, the idle good-for-nothing son of the landlady of the Whitefeather Inn in Gaythorpe. Ben, you may be sure, was only too glad to make friends with so fine a young gentleman as Louis Vernon, who had always plenty of money in his pockets, and was not loath to spend it either; so the two became inseparable companions, and Louis began to learn all kinds of mischief from Ben Barton, and to think very lightly of such sins as lying, swearing, and even drinking. He had to tell falsehoods to his uncle and aunt to account for his long absences from Coverley, and they were easily deceived, because his stories had all the semblance of reality, and because the children of Coverley were all as truthful and as open as the day in every action of their lives.

One afternoon, about a month after the arrival of the Vernons at Coverley, Dr. Rayne, riding home

from Arnborough, saw, as he passed the rectory gate, the figure of the rector busy in his garden. He drew rein, and they spoke for a few minutes over the wall.



"How does Louis get on, Mr. Tremaine?" asked the doctor, after a few general remarks.

"Slowly; he is very indolent, Doctor; his wits are sharp enough if he had energy to exercise them. Been spoilt at home, I fancy."

The doctor nodded,

"Ay, I remember his mother when she was giddy, pleasure-loving Marion Churchill. I should think she will make a very indifferent mother," said the clergyman gravely. "I say, Doctor, I have often wondered whether you are aware of your nephew's intimacy with that idle, wickedly-inclined lad down at the Whitefeather,"

The doctor looked genuinely astonished.

"With Ben Barton? no! Louis does not make a companion of him, does he?"

"More than that, they are bosom friends, and it is a very broad road they are upon at present. I met the pair last night away over by the Upland Farm, smoking as if they were thirty instead of thirteen. I hate to tell tales, but a word from you might influence him."

The doctor looked very stern.

"Last night!" he repeated. "Was he not giving your pony an airing last night, Mr. Tremaine?"

"My pony! My dear sir, I rode him myself to Prendergast to see a sick person. I was on his back when I met the lads; I took a by-path through the fields, and it was just at the edge of Squire Courtenay's preserves I met them. Ben Barton was there for no good. He has been fined at Arnborough for poaching before to-day, Dr. Rayne."

"This is very serious. I fear Louis has been telling us downright lies for a time back. Is he never out with your Tom in the evenings, Mr. Tremaine?"

The Rector shook his head. "Tom doesn't like

him, that's the truth, Doctor, and they merely exchange words."

Still sterner grew the doctor's face.

"I was hardly prepared for this. Well, I must be off; good-afternoon! I shall clear up this affair, you may be sure, Mr. Tremaine," he said, and rode off at a brisk trot, in a distressed and annoyed frame of mind.

It was nearly five o'clock when he reached Coverley, and dinner had been waiting for an hour, but he did not go at once to the dining-room. "Where's Louis?" he asked Ellen when she opened the door.

"Out about the stables, sir, with Master Charlie," Ellen answered; and her master strode off in the direction of the stables at once.

He found the boys in the stable loft, Louis busy with some pieces of wood, making a snare to catch rabbits, but that, of course, neither Charlie nor the doctor knew.

"Run into the house, my son," said the doctor to Charlie. "Wait, Louis, I have something to say to you."

Charlie slipped off at once, knowing Louis was in some scrape; then Dr. Rayne bent a pair of stern and searching eyes on his nephew's face.

"Where were you last night, Louis, that you did not appear at Coverley till nine o'clock?"

"I told you, Uncle Hubert. Tom Tremaine and I were out with his father's pony," answered Louis, his face changing somewhat.

"You are telling me a deliberate falsehood, Louis!" said his uncle in his sternest tones. "Mr. Tremaine

told me he met you up at the Upland Farm last night, and you were not alone—who was your companion?"

"Ben Barton; and Tremaine is a mean sneak. What if I do walk round the Upland Farm with Ben Barton of an evening, is there anything in that to kick up a row about?"

"Speak more respectfully, if you please!" said Dr. Rayne. "Now listen to me, Louis. Ben Barton is no fit companion for you. I would not permit any of my boys to be intimate with him. He has been a wicked disobedient boy all his life, and is likely to turn out a truly bad man. Even if he were not that, he is too far beneath you in station to permit of such intimacy between you, so it must be put a stop to. I say it, and I expect to be obeyed."

"I was chummy with all the grooms and keepers at Vernon Lee, and my father never made a row about it," said Louis with sullen defiance.

"That has nothing to do with this question. You are under my roof at present, and I require you to obey me," said Dr. Rayne quietly. "I am speaking only for your good, my boy."

A dull red flush overspread Louis Vernon's face, and his under lip quivered with passion. During all the thirteen years of his life he had never been spoken to like that, and it seemed as if every evil impulse in his nature rose up in wild anger against his uncle.

"I won't obey you! I'll have who I like for my friends!" he burst forth in fury. "I'm not a baby to be ordered about like that. I hate this place—I

wish I'd never come to it. I'll write to my father and tell him how you treat us. I—"

The next moment, to the lad's unutterable astonishment, his uncle was gone, and the grating of the key in the door told him that it was not intended that he should follow.

Yes, insult had been added to injury, and he, Louis Vernon, who regarded himself in the light of a man, was locked into the stable loft, just as if he were a six-year-old punished for a childish misdemeanour.

Uncle Hubert was not easily roused, but when really angry he administered justice so little tempered by mercy that sometimes Aunt Emily herself had to interfere.

CHAPTER V

FOR SUNBEAM'S SAKE

IF there was one individual at Coverley who really loved Louis it was Sunbeam. She was not afraid even of his sulkiest moods, and would laugh at and tease him till he was obliged to smile and have a romp with her. Nobody could possibly resist Sunbeam's ways, they were so winning and so sweet, and she herself was so bright, and happy, and sunshiny, just like her name.

Louis, of course, was not at the dinner-table that night, and when Sunbeam came in to dessert, and saw her papa's face, she knew that Louis must have been doing something that had made him very angry

indeed. By and by she crept round to his chair and laid her hand on his arm.

"Where's Louis, Papa?" she whispered.

"Louis has been naughty, dear," answered the doctor gravely.

"Is he not to have any dinner, Papa?"

"No, dear, till he is in a better frame of mind."

"But, Papa, surely he must have been very naughty not to get any dinner. I am sure he is sorry if he made you angry. May I go and ask cook for something and take it up to him?"

"No, Kitty. Louis is not to have any dinner till he comes and talks to me. He knows that. You will not take anything to him, dear."

"Oh no, Papa, not when you say I mustn't; but I'm very sorry for poor Louis," said Sunbeam softly, and stole away out of the room, to beg a little milk for her kittens, who lived with their mother, dear, cross, old Toddles, out in the stable.

It was a funny yet touching sight to see Sunbeam feeding her cats. She carried a little basin of milk in one hand, and some pieces of bread in the other, and, going into the stable, she called to Toddles, who immediately came running out of her nest among the hay, followed by two fluffy little gray kittens, just like balls, with very wee faces and great staring black eyes.

"Now, Toddles, my dear, do teach your children better manners," she said, sitting down and beginning to break the bread into the basin, while the kittens clambered all over her. "I really am quite ashamed of them, and of you, you lazy old thing, for letting

them be so rude. There now, don't be greedy, eat nicely, genteelly, as cook says. Isn't it nice? Well, be grateful, for poor Cousin Louis has had no dinner. Oh, dear, I am so sorry for Louis!"

At that moment the noise of someone walking in



the loft overhead made Sunbeam jump up, and run round and up the outside steps to the door. It was locked and the key was gone, so who could be there?

"Who's in, who's walking about?" she called through the key-hole; but there was no response. Then Sunbeam bethought herself of a little trap-door, opening through the roof of the harness-room into

the loft, and in a second she was flying down the steps, and in another was in the harness-room, scrambling up the narrow ladder to the trap-door. Sunbeam's arms were not very strong; but it was a very tiny door, and not stiff on its hinges, so, by a mighty effort, she swung it back, and poked her head out. And there was Louis sitting whittling a stick on a bag of corn.

"Louis! I say, Louis, what are you doing there?" she squeaked.

"Hulloa, Kit! what are you doing there? Where did you come from? I didn't know there was a door there," said Louis.

"Yes there is; I'm coming through, see. If I fall down I'll be killed likely, then there'll be a funeral, and Toddles and the kittens will die of starvation, as nobody would ever mind to feed them," said Sunbeam breathlessly; and in another moment she had crawled through the door and stood upright in the loft.

"There what an—an—undertaking!" said she, getting out the long word quite triumphantly. "What are you doing here, Cousin Louis?"

"Amusing myself. Uncle Hubert locked me in," said Louis grimly. "You'd better get out, Kit, in case he beats you for speaking to me."

"Papa never beats anybody," said Sunbeam gravely. "He didn't forbid me to come, only said I hadn't to bring you any dinner."

"Oh! he said that, did he?" said Louis sarcastically. "I suppose he was making an example of me at the table?"

"No, indeed, he never said your name at the

table, Louis Vernon," answered Sunbeam indignantly. "Only I asked where you were, and if I might take you some dinner, but he wouldn't tell me. I thought you were upstairs, and I came to feed my cats, and heard you walking about. What have you been doing, Louis?"

Sunbeam sat down on a sack as she said this, and, crossing her small hands on her lap, looked at her cousin as gravely as a judge. Somehow, at sight of that dear, sweet, childish face all feelings of anger and resentment died out of the boy's heart.

"Tell me what you were doing, do tell me, Louis," pleaded Sunbeam. "It must have been something bad, surely, for Papa was very angry."

"I went out walking with Ben Barton last night; that's what Uncle's mad about," said Louis.

Sunbeam opened her eyes very wide. "Ben Barton, Louis! that bad, wicked, cruel boy, who robs poor little birds' nests, and drowns cats, and throws stones at dogs, and who has even been in jail! I don't wonder Papa was angry."

Louis was silent, somewhat ashamed of himself, it must be told. His uncle's anger had only hardened him, but Sunbeam's sorrowful surprise was a very different thing, and very much harder to bear.

Presently she slipped from her seat, and, coming very close to her cousin, laid one pleading arm about his neck. He would have permitted no one else, not even Fanny, to take such a liberty with him.

"Dear Louis," said the sweet voice, "don't go with Ben Barton; you might learn to be like him, and then we couldn't love you, you know."

"Who loves me here, I'd like to know? Uncle Hubert doesn't; Aunt Emily doesn't; Mabel looks at me in a quiet way, as if I were a snake."

"I love you, Cousin Louis," said Sunbeam softly.

"You are a good little soul, Kit, the best of the lot," said Louis less bitterly; and there followed a little silence.

"Suppose we go down now, and you have some dinner," suggested Sunbeam presently.

"Can't; Uncle Hubert locked me up; must stay here till he lets me out."

"Well, but if you tell him you are sorry—I know you are sorry, Louis—it will be all right. Come on, down the trap-door; what fun!"

Louis threw away the stick he was whittling, shut up his knife, and began to whistle.

"Come on, Cousin Louis," urged Sunbeam, already moving towards the trap-door.

He hesitated a moment, but he was very hungry, and Sunbeam had made him ashamed of his rudeness to his uncle.

"All right, Kit! lead on. I don't know how on earth you manage it, but you always make me do what you want."

"Everybody does what I want," said Sunbeam contentedly. "I guess it's because I love the whole world; Mamma says so. You go down first, and then you can help me. It's worse going down than coming up."

In a very few minutes the pair were safely landed on the ground, and, keeping firm hold of her cousin's hand, Sunbeam hurried him towards the house. Two

pairs of eyes watched them from the drawing-room window, unobserved. They encountered no one, except Ellen, in the hall, who told Sunbeam her father and mother were in the drawing-room.

So the pair went up together, but at the drawing-room door Sunbeam stopped and said she would wait for him outside. So, scarcely believing what he was about to do, Louis opened the door and marched straight up to his uncle.

"I'm sorry I was so rude to you, Uncle Hubert," said he, with an astonishing amount of frankness; "and I'll try to remember what you said about Ben Barton," and they heard him mutter under his breath, "for Sunbeam's sake."

"That's right, my lad!" said the doctor, taking his nephew's hand in a strong, hearty grasp; "this is manly, and I'm proud and glad to see it—now off and have some dinner."

"Yes, sir," said Louis confusedly; but before he had time to go he felt a gentle hand touch his shoulder, and Aunt Emily bent over him and kissed him for the first time since he came to Coverley.

"God bless and help you, Louis!" she whispered very earnestly; and Louis hurried out of the room.

"Sunbeam's doing, Emily," said the doctor, with a falter in his voice; "bless the child; what a heart she has!"

"Yes," answered Mrs. Rayne, with a smile and a tear. "God bless her! she is rightly named a Sunbeam."

CHAPTER VI

FANNY'S LESSON

I REALLY wish I had a new dress!" said Fanny Vernon discontentedly one Saturday afternoon when Mabel and she were in the school-room together. Mabel was busy making a needle-case of satin and crewel-work for her mother's birthday gift, and Fanny was lying on the hearth-rug with her head on a stool, heartily sick of herself, longing for something to do, yet too indolent to exert herself in the slightest.

"A new dress, Fanny! why, you have five or six, I am sure, quite good. You can't wear more than one at a time anyway."

"No, but I am sick of that old silk, and that ugly blue merino, and this check, and—"

"You are always sick of something, Fanny. What a miserable little creature you must be!"

"It's this place. I should die if I lived here always. At home there was always something new, and I had a dress whenever I wanted one; sometimes I got three new at once. I shall want a dozen, I expect, when Mamma comes home, to make up for wearing old ones so long. I say, don't you get sick to death of that old gray tweed?"

Mabel looked at her neat and pretty dress with affectionate eyes.

"No, I always like things I have worn for a bit;

they get like old friends. I say, Fanny, do get something to do. How can you lie idle half a day?"

"Nicely," answered Fanny, with a yawn. "I wish I was grown up and had a maid like Mamma has, and that I could go to parties, and picnics, and balls, and have lots of pleasure, and then get married, and wear white satin and diamonds like Sir Julian's daughter did down at Hatherden."

Mabel laughed.

"You will have to wait a long time for that, Fanny."

"Not long—only seven years. I mean to marry when I am eighteen—quite old enough; Sir Julian's daughter was just nineteen. I suppose you will wait till you are thirty, and then marry Tom Tremaine, who will be the rector by that time, and sew flannels for these ugly old women and dirty children in Gaythorpe."

"Who'll sew flannels, Tom or me?" laughed Mabel.

"You. Tom'll make up sermons and read prayers. I say, hasn't Miss King gone home? What a fright she is in that ugly old black frock! Why doesn't she get a new one and make herself smart? I wouldn't look so ugly for anything."

"Nobody thinks Miss King ugly," said Mabel soberly. "I love her in that old frock, or in anything. I'm sure she is dear and kind, Fanny."

"Oh, well, for a governess, yes! Fraulein I had at home had a frightful temper. She used to throw things at me, and Mamma said she swore in German, but I just laughed at her and never learned anything

unless I wanted. Miss King is frightfully stingy, surely; why does she wear those old woollen cuffs instead of linen ones, or bracelets?"

"We have no business with what Miss King wears," said Mabel, still soberly. "There, that's done; suppose we go out and hunt for the others. I hear Sunbeam shouting, so I suppose they're having some fun."

"How can you all be so fond of that child? She is too pert for anything. Baby is nicer in my eyes," said Fanny, picking herself up lazily. "Ugh, what a dismal day! I don't think I shall go out, Mabel."

"All right, stay in, I'm off!" said Mabel, putting her work in a drawer and dancing out of the room. Left alone, Fanny opened the old piano, and proceeded to bang upon it for a few minutes. In the middle of her performance Mrs. Rayne entered the room. She had been in her dressing-room, which was only separated from the school-room by a thin partition, and had overheard a part of the girls' conversation.

"All alone, Fanny!" she said pleasantly. "I am just going to drive to Arnborough with Bobbie in the phaeton—suppose you get your hat and come with me?"

"I shall be very glad, Aunt Emily," said Fanny with alacrity. "I don't know what to do with myself. I shall be ready in a minute."

In about half an hour Bobbie was trotting briskly along the smooth wide highway to Arnborough, drawing the phaeton containing Mrs. Rayne and Fanny.

Arnborough was a smoky town, in which there were a great many ironworks. From the top of the hill coming down from Gaythorpe there seemed to be quite a forest of chimneys in the hollow. The people were chiefly of the working-class, for none except those who were obliged to, made their residence in Arnborough. Fanny had not been in the town before, and was much interested. Her aunt drove to several shops and made some purchases, then turned Bobbie's head down a quiet and dingy street in which there were very few shops, and where the dwellings were two-storied buildings, very black and murky to look at from without, whatever they might be within.

"I have a call to make here, Fanny," said Mrs. Rayne, drawing up Bobbie at the door of one of these houses. "Bobbie will stand quite still."

"Am I to come too, Aunt Emily?"

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Rayne.

So Fanny followed her aunt out of the carriage, and stood beside her while she rang the bell. To Fanny's astonishment it was answered by Miss King, who wore a shabbier gown even than the one Fanny had spoken of so slightly to Mabel, and she had a big white apron over it too, just like a housemaid.

She looked very pleased indeed to see Mrs. Rayne, and asked her in at once. Through an open door Fanny caught sight of two children playing, and wondered who they were, and what was their relationship to Miss King. The visitors were shown into the front sitting-room, which was the least dingy place in that dingy house, and there, on a sofa drawn very

near to the hearth, Fanny saw the figure of a lad about sixteen, lying as if he had lain there a very long time, and was getting used to it now. His face, though painfully thin and worn, was very pleasant and peaceful to look upon, and yet it told of much weariness and suffering, more than Fanny Vernon had ever dreamed of in her life.

"Well, Walter, how are you to-day?" said Mrs. Rayne kindly; and it was easy to see, from the bright smile that touched Walter's lips, how dear and welcome a visitor she was.

"I am no worse, thank you. Is this Rachel's new pupil?" he asked, holding out his hand.

Mrs. Rayne nodded, and Fanny touched the outstretched hand and then crept away over to the window and sat down.

"Rachel is away for mother. She has not been so well to-day, and was lying down," Walter explained. "Is the doctor quite well?"

"Yes thank you. Well, Mrs. King, I hope I see you a little better?"

The last words were addressed to an old white-haired lady who just then entered the room. She looked as ill as Walter almost, only her figure was quite straight, and his was not.

"Thank you, it is only the head," replied Mrs. King. "You are well: your face tells me so."

"Coverley air keeps Mrs. Rayne in health, Mother," said Rachel King, with her wonderfully pleasant smile. "Well, excuse me, Mrs. Rayne, I have something cooking in the oven, and I must see after it."

So saying, she left the room.

Then Mrs. King turned to the visitor, smiling a little, though Fanny saw a tear on her eyelash.

"Rachel works like a slave on Saturdays, Mrs. Rayne, for Walter, and the children, and me. Last night it was one when she left off sewing, and I heard



her up at five this morning. She is always so cheery and pleasant, too, and never tired; she is an unspeakable blessing to me."

"I know it. I see it," answered Mrs. Rayne.

"She is saving up to send us all down to Sandybar in June. She is making up her old gowns for herself, and cutting up some of the very oldest for the children. She's a perfect genius, my Rachel," said the

old lady, with the garrulous pride of age and motherliness.

"Nobody knows that better than we do," returned Mrs. Rayne. "Dr. Rayne was saying the other day that he thought Walter might be able to get up some day off the sofa."

"I know I shall," said Walter, smiling, "when I move into a larger room."

Mrs. Rayne knew what he meant, but Fanny only wondered.

Presently Rachel came back, and they talked a little together, and then Mrs. Rayne rose. During all this time Fanny had never spoken, but her aunt knew that nothing which had passed was lost upon her.

They drove through quite a number of streets before a word was spoken on either side.

"Do you still wonder why Miss King wears her old gown till it is very shabby, Fanny?" asked Mrs. Rayne at length.

"Whose children are these two?" Fanny asked, just as if she had not heard the question.

"Her sister's orphans, whom Miss King pledged herself to care for. That house belongs to Mrs. King, together with a very little money. It is Miss King who supports them all; so you see now, Fanny, it is not wise to condemn the appearance of any fellow-creature. We never know what glory and loveliness of self-sacrifice may be wrapped up in the folds of an old gown."

Fanny said nothing at all, and the three miles to Coverley were accomplished in perfect silence. When

they turned in at the avenue gate Fanny said suddenly to her aunt—

“Aunt Emily!”

“Yes, dear.”

“Papa gave me five sovereigns when he went away. They are in my purse yet; may I do what I like with them?”

“Let me hear what you would do.”

“May I send them to Miss King to take Walter and her mother and the children to Sandybar? Send it, you know, so as she wouldn’t guess where it came from.”

“Yes, dear,” answered Aunt Emily, and turned upon the child beside her a look such as Fanny had never seen before.

“I am sorry I said these things about Miss King, Aunt Emily, and I will never again, for I am quite sure she must be the best woman in the world.”

So Fanny’s lesson had not been learned in vain.

CHAPTER VII

A MIDNIGHT ADVENTURE

IT must not be supposed that though Louis had been touched that night, even to confession of his fault, he became a good boy all at once. Very far from it. For a few days only he strove to keep his word to his uncle and to Sunbeam, and did not go near the Whitefeather in the evenings. Very soon the influence wore off, and he would be away

for hours at a time. The evenings were lengthening, and he was not so often missed as when the children were always in the house. Besides, the chill east winds of an unusually bitter spring caused much sickness among young and old or delicate folks, and Dr. Rayne was kept so busy that he had not much time to think about the children.

One afternoon Louis was walking slowly up the road from the rectory towards Coverley, when he met Ben lounging, as usual, with hands in pockets and pipe in mouth. It was a mystery what attraction Louis saw in him; he was a big, rough, rather repulsive-looking fellow, with a very low type of face, and a particularly uninviting pair of black eyes.

"Hulloa, Louis!" he said familiarly. It was long since he had dropped the "Master" in addressing his companion. "Got school over, eh?"

"Yes; what's going on, Ben?"

"Nothin' particler, at least that you'd care to hear; you've been fighting so shy o' me for a while, I daren't tell you anything."

Louis looked suddenly interested.

"Oh, stuff! it's only you imagine it. Tell me something fresh."

"Well, look here; are you on for a lark, Louis?"

"I rather think I am. I'm half fossilized up yonder," answered Louis, nodding in the direction of Coverley.

"Well, I say; Jim Curtis an' me's goin' over the Upland Farm to-night, you know what for. Twelve sharp at the High Meadow gate. Are you on?"

Louis looked eager and excited, and yet dubious.

"I'm on if I could get out; but what would my uncle say?"

"Oh, well, if you're such a baby you can't expect to get a lark, of course. We ain't feared, and my, it is fun! I've been before in the night, and it's the best sport out. Jim's got a new snare; made it himself, the neatest little thing you ever saw."

"Well, I'll be there," said Louis firmly. "I'll climb out of my window on to the pear-tree, and then down to the scullery roof."

"That's it; twelve sharp; just before the moon's up," said Ben, and, nodding familiarly, sauntered off.

Louis was in a very uneasy frame of mind all day, but he was also eager to share the poaching expedition, especially a midnight one, which had a flavour of adventure in it, very enjoyable.

When he went to bed he carefully examined the fastenings of his window, and, finding them easily adjusted, lay down on the top of the bed with his clothes on. Needless to say he did not sleep, and about half-past eleven he rose, shoved up the window very softly, and climbed out, taking care to leave it open so that he might enter without difficulty on his return. A few minutes saw him safely landed in the yard behind the scullery, standing rather forlornly in the chill darkness of a moonless March evening, and, if the truth must be told, rather wishing himself safely back in bed. However, the thought of the scornful grin and chaffing words Ben would bestow on him the next time they met gave him courage, so he set off briskly down the avenue, across the high-road, and on to the squire's lands. It was twenty minutes'

walk to the High Meadow gate, and to his unspeakable relief Ben and Jim Curtis were waiting for him there. The latter was the ostler at the Whitefeather, and to him Ben Barton owed much of his training in the ways of sin.

Curtis greeted Louis with a grin and opened the gate into the field. When they were half across he put his finger on his lips.

"Hush! we must be like mice, you fellows. No saying where Collins and the rest may be lurking, and he won't spare us if he catches us at it to-night."

Collins was the squire's head keeper, and, needless to say, the enemy of all such as Jim Curtis and Ben Barton. Louis felt a cold sweat break over him, and he actually shivered with fear, but there was nothing for it but to hold his tongue and follow his neighbours.

Away over at the edge of the Upland Wood they began to move even more stealthily and cautiously, and, coming to a stand at last, Curtis took his snares out of his pocket. Stooping down he set one carefully and snugly in a rabbit-hole, and was just getting to his feet when, lo, a heavy hand was laid on his arm, and Collins flashed his lantern full in his face.

"I've got you cleanly to-night, my lad," he said grimly; and in a minute a policeman standing in the background slipped a pair of handcuffs on Curtis's wrists.

Meanwhile the underkeepers had secured Ben and Louis, the latter as white as a sheet, and his teeth chattering in his head. Having seen the chief culprit safe Collins turned to look at the others, and you may



imagine his surprise when his eyes fell on Louis Vernon, whom he knew quite well by sight.

"Hulloa, Master Vernon, you mixed up in this rascally business! A pretty kettle of fish for the doctor; but I can't help it, you must march with me. I'll give you a night's lodgings—say good-night to your chums, they'll sleep sound and sweet to-night in Arnborough jail."

Louis could not reply, but suffered himself to be led off by Collins, who took him home to his own place, and locked him in an outhouse. Yes, Collins had little respect of persons; it did not matter to him though Louis Vernon was the son of a squire ten times richer than his own master. He had been found trespassing in pursuit of game, which in Collins's eyes was a very grave offence, and must be gravely punished.

In the gray dawn Louis fell asleep through sheer exhaustion, and when he awoke the sun was shining broadly outside, but he had no idea of the time, for his watch, not having been wound up the previous night, had stopped. A few minutes after he awoke the key turned in the lock, and Collins threw open the door.

"Walk out, young gentleman, you may go home to breakfast now, if you like. How did you like your downy pillows, eh?" he asked grimly. "I've just been at Coverley relieving their minds, which were rather uneasy this morning when they found that the bird had flown."

Louis crept out, too miserable and ashamed to answer a word, and he went straight home at once. He knew it was the better plan, and he did not seem to care, somehow, whether his uncle punished him or not.

Dr. Rayne did not punish him. He met him near the house, and stopped, looking at him with eyes in which there was more of sorrow than of anger.

"I am sorry you thought your promise so little binding, Louis," he said gravely. "As you have so disgraced us, your aunt and I cannot, of course, permit you to remain at Coverley till your parents return to England. I have written to make arrangements for your return to Eton with Hubert after Easter; till then I will try to hope that you will behave yourself."

Then he passed on and Louis continued his walk to the house, feeling that a burst of passion, or a horse-whipping even, would have been preferable to these sorrowful words.

But harder still to bear was the look of pain on Aunt Emily's face when he reached the house; and hardest of all were these words which fell from Sunbeam's lips, followed by a burst of tears:

"Oh, Cousin Louis, how could you be so wicked? I never thought you could, and now I musn't love you any more, you have made Papa and Mamma so miserable. Can't you be a good boy, Cousin Louis, won't you try?"

Louis made no reply; but if ever boy made an earnest resolution to turn over a new leaf, he did on that memorable morning at Coverley.

CHAPTER VIII

IN HAWTHORN DELL

THE children were gipsying down in Hawthorn Dell, a lovely spot in the woods about three miles from Coverley.

It was a beautiful and picturesque sight that sunny April afternoon: Mabel busy over her stick fire, her hands very black and her face very red, Fanny and Hubert busy spreading the table, Charlie rubbing down the perspiration on Bobbie's shaggy sides with a bunch of grass, and Louis and Sunbeam getting the eatables out of the phaeton.

Hubert had been home a week, and he had brought sunshine and peace with him, for there had not been a cloud or a jar to break the harmony of these happy days.

Even Louis was influenced by that bright and happy spirit, liker Sunbeam's than any of the others, and the two boy cousins were, on the whole, good friends.

There had been no more stolen visits to the White-feather for Louis, and he was really trying to retrieve his character, and prove that he could be good if he chose. Dr. and Mrs. Rayne, never slow to appreciate honest effort in the right direction, spoke many good and helpful words to the lad, which sank deep into his heart, and would bear their fruit in after-years. But nobody knew except the boy himself how much

Sunbeam's love and faith had to do with his earnest striving after a better life. They were never apart, and the child's clinging to her boy cousin was something wonderful to see.

"There must be real good in Louis, Papa," said Aunt Emily once, "or Sunbeam wouldn't be so fond of him. The instinct of childhood is unerring."

"Of course there is good; but just like that garden of ours, my love, the weeds have grown stronger than the flowers, though there are many good roots in the soil. We'll make a man of Louis yet."

"I say, Louis, my eyes are about scorched out," cried Mabel presently, "come you and watch the kettle."

"Let me do it, Cousin Mabel," said Fanny, springing forward and beginning vigorously to poke twigs under the refractory kettle. Fanny had grown strangely unselfish during these past weeks: it seemed as if the lesson learned in Miss King's home at Arnborough was likely to be a lasting one, there was such a change in her in all ways.

"I'll do it, Fan," said Hubert, coming to the rescue. "Nice gentlemen we are, Louis, to allow the girls to do the worst part of the affair."

Under Hubert's supervision the kettle speedily boiled, tea was infused, and a very hungry and happy party sat down to enjoy the repast. They did such justice to it that there was not a scrap left, which occasioned Hubert to make a great many funny remarks, and Mabel to express a great deal of motherly concern lest they should be hungry again before they got home. Before they rose it had to be settled what

they were to do with themselves for the next couple of hours.

"We must leave at seven, you know," said Mabel, "not a minute later, for Mamma is always anxious when we are out by ourselves."

"All right! I'm off to hunt for the source of that brook, and to try and get some rare stones for old Antiquity, our science master, you know. He is a great geologist, and is always after specimens. Who'll come?" asked Hubert.

"I will," cried Charlie and Fanny together.

"I'll come too, then, at least a little bit up the stream, I want some real nice ferns. Sunbeam, dear, you had better come with me," said Mabel.

"I'll take care of Sunbeam, Mab," said Louis. "I'm going off after some wild flowers for Aunt Emily. I know the ones she likes, and there'll be hawks' nests here, I think; I'll have a hunt for one."

"Mamma told us to be sure and keep away from the tops of these dreadful cliffs, they are so treacherous, and you can fall over so easily," said Mabel anxiously. "You will be sure to take good care of Sunbeam."

"Of course! Aunt Emily warned me of the cliffs too; I won't go far, Mab. Sunbeam and I will just poke about here and pick wild flowers, and watch the goods and chattels."

But still Mabel was uneasy.

"I think Sunbeam had better go with us," she said; but Sunbeam herself declared she would remain with Louis, so there was nothing for it but to go off and leave them.

The right side of the dell was bounded by very high and steep cliffs, almost overgrown by wild rose and bramble bushes, and in the cunning clefts of which nestled all kinds of rare and beautiful wild flowers not to be got anywhere else. Louis and Sunbeam walked slowly along the smooth green turf at the base, looking up at the lovely leaves and blossoms which grew so temptingly far out of their reach.

"I must have some of these for Aunt Emily. Could you stay here, dear, till I run round and up to the top of the cliff. I could swing down to some of them, but I can't climb up from here."

"I'll come too, Louis, and hold your jacket while you hang over to get them," answered Sunbeam.

"A bright idea, which would end in us both tumbling over and breaking our necks. Well, come on round, there's no harm in seeing whether I can get them from the top or not."

So they went off, Louis quite forgetting that he had promised his aunt to take care of Sunbeam, and especially to keep her far away from the cliffs. She was so fearless and daring that, on a former occasion when they had been gipsying in Hawthorn Dell, she had been found hanging by a bush half-way up the face of the cliff, where she had climbed in search of a bright-coloured flower, a position from which she was rescued with difficulty. Since then Mrs. Rayne had been very loath to allow Sunbeam to go picnicking with the rest, and had only consented that day on condition that they all looked after her and kept her out of mischief. In a short space of time the two were standing on the edge of the cliff, from which

they had a superb view, even as far as Sandybar with its blue line of sea. But both were too eager about



the flowers to think of the view. Louis got down on his knees and peered over.

"Yes, I can do it fine; there are plenty of things

to hold on to. Now, Kit, stand far back, you'll be sure to fall; mind I won't be two minutes."

So saying, Louis began carefully to descend, holding firmly by the strong bushes which grew thickly round him, and in a few minutes he had a footing on a narrow ledge, within reach of the blossoms he had envied. He leaned over and began to pick them as quickly as possible, and soon became so intent on them that he quite forgot Sunbeam, till a crackling noise made him start and look up. There was Sunbeam coming down ten times quicker than he had done, her tiny hands slipping from bush to bush with ease and assurance, and her face flushed with excitement.

"Here I am, oh what fun!" she cried, and waved one hand triumphantly at her cousin. Then a terrible thing happened: the loosely-rooted shrub to which Sunbeam was trusting her whole weight gave way, and Louis shut his eyes.

Though he lives to be an old man he will never forget the unutterable horror of that moment. A faint scream broke upon his ears, and he looked down, to see Sunbeam lying on the green sward in the dell beneath, still and prostrate, and to all appearance dead.

And he had killed her! With what words would he answer to them all for Sunbeam's life?

CHAPTER IX

SUNBEAM'S STICK

I NEED not pause to describe to you the horror and grief of the others, when, hearing Louis's frantic shouts and whistling, they came hurrying back to the dell. Nor shall I tell you how they got Bobbie harnessed in an incredibly short space of time, and, lifting poor Sunbeam in, drove quickly away home. She was not dead, for she would moan from time to time as if in great pain; but the golden lashes closed over the violet eyes never stirred, and so they took her home.

Mrs. Rayne was calm when she saw her darling, calm and self-possessed, though her face became as white and rigid almost as Sunbeam's own.

Happily the doctor was in the house, and the child was attended to at once. I must not try to describe to you Louis's state of mind. Guessing what it was, no word of reproach or of anger passed the lips of anyone.

Father and Mother watched by Sunbeam's bed all night, watched and prayed till the rosy morning light broke upon the world, and the sun rose upon a new day. At last the white lids stirred, and slowly lifted from the violet eyes, and she looked round in a slow, dazed way, as if wondering to see Father and Mother bending over her.

"Oh, I was hurt! I fell down, I remember. Yes, Louis, I'm coming," she said eagerly, and then

rambled on about the flowers, and the hawk's nest, and the cliffs, showing that the poor little brain was sorely disturbed. And thus she continued for days.

But God was merciful. He had compassion on the stricken household, he heard the passionate prayers which Louis Vernon uplifted to heaven, and spared Sunbeam to Coverley. Ay, but it would be a very long time before she was the Sunbeam of old, and when, two months after, Hubert and Louis came home again, at midsummer, there was a pale-faced, thin little maiden hopping about on a stick, for her right leg had been much injured, and would not be quite well for months.

Louis burst into tears when he saw her, but she laughed, though her own eyes were wet, and said she was learning to be good and patient, and would, doubtless, be glad some day that her daring had met with such severe punishment.

There was no fear of her complete recovery ultimately. So after a little Louis began to feel less agony at the sight of the stick; but he could never smile with the rest at Sunbeam's absurd talk about her crutch. I think none but Aunt Emily knew the depth of his feeling in the matter.

That was the most powerful as it was the most painful lesson of Louis Vernon's life; and by and by, when Sunbeam was strong and well again, and had no further use for the stick, he begged that he might have it to keep.

"I want it for a warning, a kind of finger-post, when I am going wrong," he said to his aunt, to whom he now spoke quite freely about all his faults and

failings. "It will call up all the dreadful consequences of carelessness and disobedience. May I have it, Auntie?"

"Surely, dear, and if it proves so useful as all that, we may have occasion yet to bless Sunbeam's stick," said Aunt Emily, with a smile and a tear.

The latter part of the year the Vernons spent at Coverley was very different from, and very much happier than, the first; and when they went home to Vernon Lee to welcome their parents home, true regret and loving wishes followed them from all.

And they were better children from that time, for even as Mrs. Rayne had hoped, Coverley had been to them both the birthplace of a new and better life.

Louis Vernon is a man now, filling nobly a man's place in the world, and Fanny is the gentle, loving mistress of a happy home of her own.

And they say sometimes to Uncle Hubert and Aunt Emily—who are growing old and gray, and have many little grandchildren about their knees—that they owe all they are, and may be, to that year at Coverley.

THE END

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